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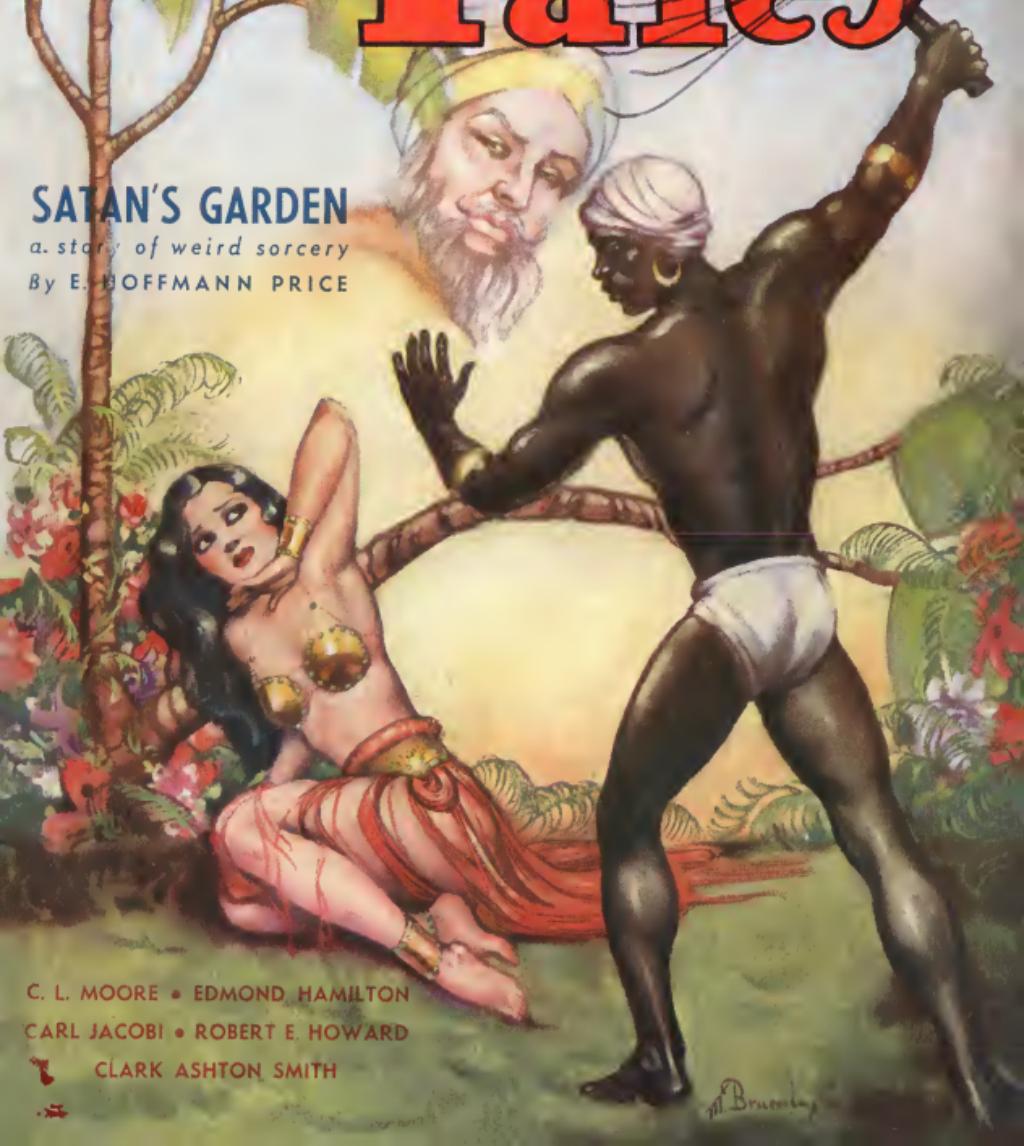
APRIL

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SATAN'S GARDEN

a. story of weird sorcery

By E. HOFFMANN PRICE



C. L. MOORE • EDMOND HAMILTON

CARL JACOBI • ROBERT E. HOWARD

CLARK ASHTON SMITH

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A Mysterious Message from the Ether!

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"First: All standing armies shall be disbanded, and every implement of warfare, of whatsoever nature, destroyed.

"Second: All war vessels shall be assembled—those of the Atlantic fleets midway between New York and Gibraltar, those of the Pacific fleets midway between San Francisco and Honolulu—and sunk.

"Third: One-half of all the monetary gold supply of the world shall be collected and turned over to my agents at places to be announced later.

"Fourth: At noon on the third day after the foregoing demands have been complied with, all existing governments shall resign and surrender their powers to my agents, who will be on hand to receive them.

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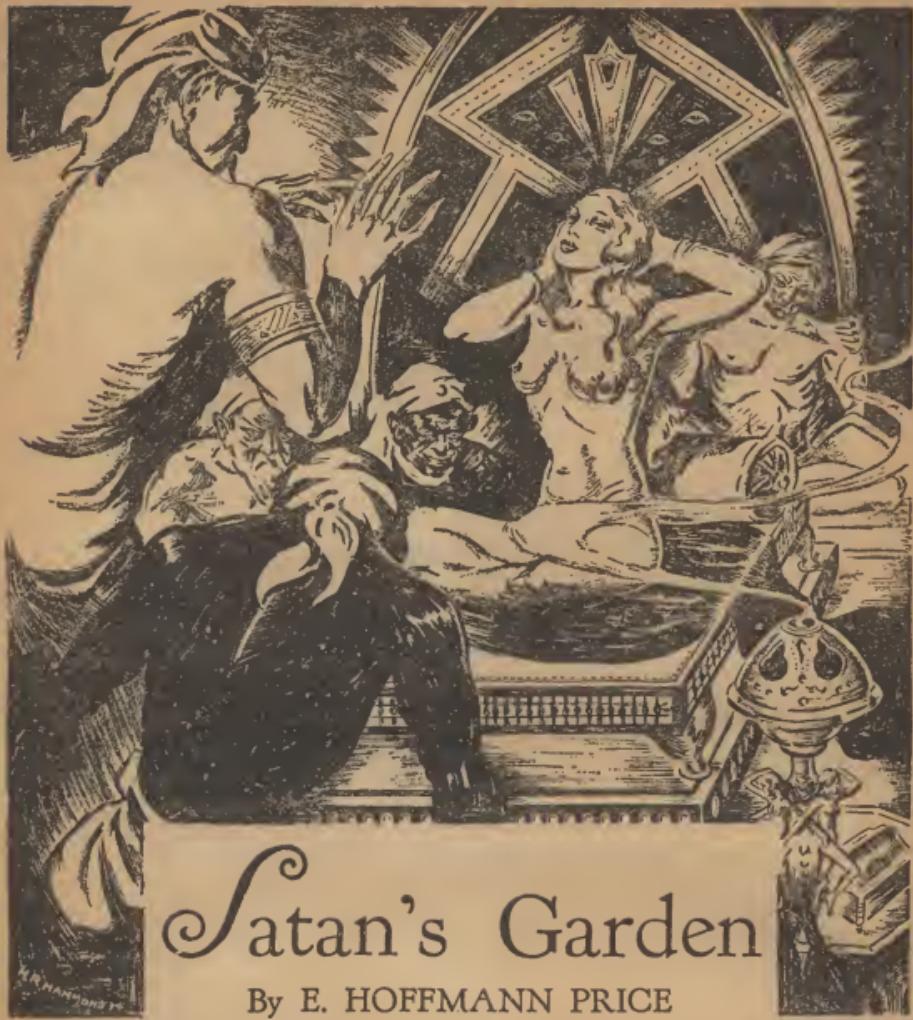
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"The dead woman shivered for a moment, then sat erect on the bier."



Satan's Garden

By E. HOFFMANN PRICE

The story of a terrific adventure in Bayonne, two ravishingly beautiful girls, occult evil and sudden death in the lair of the hasheesh-eaters

1. Invisible Scourge

IT WAS long past the hour of tinkling glass, and song to the guitar, and crowded tables at the Café du Théâtre. The gray-walled city of Bayonne slept in the moonlight like an odalisque overcome with wine and lying bejewelled in a garden whence the musicians had departed.

It is thus that Bayonne has slept each night of the full moon for more than nineteen centuries at the junction of the Nive and the Adour, guarding the road to Spain.

There were two who sat in a room on the second floor of a house that faced the street running along the city wall. One

was old and leathery, with fierce, upturned gray mustaches, and eyes that smoldered beneath shaggy brows; the other was not more than half his age, a lean, broad-shouldered man whose bronzed features were rugged as the masonry of the fortress, and seamed with a saber slash that ran from his cheek-bone almost to the chin.

The younger emerged from the depths of his chair like a panther leaving his cage. He paced the length of the room and paused at the window to stare out into the dazzling moon-brightness that slowly marched from the rolling, tree-clustered parkway and invaded the shadows cast by the city wall across the dry moat that skirted it. Then, as he retraced his steps, he glanced at his watch.

"Later than usual tonight, Pierre," he observed. His voice was weary from baffled wrath. "Do you suppose that It may skip a night?"

Pierre d'Artois shook his gray head and sighed.

"Why should It fail to torment her? We sit here like dummies, you and I. And to what purpose? Look!" He indicated the seals on the door at his left. "It could get through neither door nor window without breaking those seals——"

"But It did, by heaven!" exclaimed the younger. And Glenn Farrell resumed his pacing the length of the Boukhara rug that carpeted the room. He made a gesture of futile rage, then resumed, "But how, Pierre—and why?"

Pierre d'Artois twisted his mustache, shook his head again, and struck light to a cigarette. Farrell sank into the depths of his chair and retrieved the cigar butt he had laid on its arm.

"We couldn't have slept on post without one of us being aware of it," resumed Farrell. His voice was monotonous from

Since the publication of "The Rajah's Gift" in WEIRD TALES nine years ago, followed by "The Stranger from Kurdistan," E. Hoffmann Price has been acclaimed one of the masters of quality fiction; yet his superb artistry has not interfered in any way with the vividness and thrilling power of his fascinating stories. West Point graduate, expert swordsman, orientalist and former soldier of fortune, his life itself is a thrilling tale of adventure. Endowed with a natural gift for narrative, he possesses also a warm imagination and unsurpassed literary craftsmanship. All these qualities are woven into the strange weird tale presented herewith: "Satan's Garden."

repetition of a statement so often made that he himself had begun to doubt it. "And if we had——"

He regarded the waxen seals on the door.

"Those seals couldn't have been duplicated, with your die locked in a bank vault each night. And she couldn't have escaped."

"No, she could not," agreed d'Artois. "But some one—some *thing*—got in."

"A weasel, a cat, a snake," enumerated Farrell, "might slip through those bars. Nothing larger. Certainly nothing large enough to—good God! Listen!"

Grim and trembling they stood at the sealed door. They heard a moaning and a sobbing, then the screams of a woman seeking to stifle her outcry.

"Give me that key!" demanded Farrell.

He unlocked the door and flung it open, shattering the seals and breaking the cord that ran from panel to jamb.

D'Artois followed him. They halted a few paces past the threshold.

"Look, damn it, look!"

As Farrell switched on the lights, he pointed at the woman who lay face down on the broad, canopied bed. She was writhing and moaning. At regular intervals she flinched as from a blow, then shuddered, and relaxed.

"Lord! I can almost hear the whip," muttered Farrell. He leaped forward and thrust out his arm as if to ward off blows that flailed the girl's bare shoulders. Then he retreated, shaking his head.

"If we can't see it, how can we stop it?" he muttered despairingly.

They stood, fascinated and horrified, watching a lovely girl being flogged by an invisible scourge. They saw the red welts rising, crossing and recrossing her shoulders, and cropping up under the filmy silken folds of her nightgown.

"Look at it! Her gown didn't move a hair's breadth, but the whip raised another welt! Pierre, it's impossible! That gown ought to be cut to pieces by that flogging. Or else nothing's really hitting her. Or else"—Farrell shook his head in bewilderment despair—"or else we're both crazy as hoot-owls!"

"Tenez donc," said the old Frenchman, taking his friend by the arm. Though he himself shrank in sympathy with the girl who writhed under the invisible lash, his voice was calmer than Farrell's. "Let us study this thing. And man or devil, in the end we will have his hide!"

"You take the devils, Pierre, and give me a handful of whatever men you think are messed up in it! I'll—eh, what's that?"

He knelt beside the bed, gestured to d'Artois.

"Listen to that, Pierre!" he said in a tense whisper.

"*'Junayn' ash-Shaytan . . .*" they heard her say.

"Holy smoke!" gasped Farrell. "*'Junayn' ash-Shaytan . . .* and did you get what she said after that?" Then, before d'Artois could reply, "It's over now."

THE sleeping girl had ceased writhing and tossing. Her cries had subsided to a drowsy murmuring. The two watchers stared at each other for a moment.

"But yes," said d'Artois finally. "I heard it, though it has been several years since I heard any one use such villainous language. It would do credit to one of the dancing-girls in Abu Aswad's dive in Cairo. But this *junayn' ash-Shaytan*, that puzzles me."

"Simple!" said Farrell. "Satan's garden."

"*Mais oui!*" agreed d'Artois with a touch of impatience. "Only, what is the point?"

He frowned fiercely and twisted his mustache.

"*Mon vieux*," he said after a moment's reflection, "in this first articulate speech in her sleep we may find a clue to the invisible scourge that leaves her back crossed with welts."

Farrell shook his head.

"Crazier and crazier," he muttered. "We're all nutty. I am, you are, she is—all of us! Now she's talking Arabic! I'm beginning to wonder whether her back is really beaten or whether we're both suffering the same delusion she is."

D'Artois led the way to the door. Farrell followed.

"I have been expecting that," he said as he reached for a brief-case lying on the table. He opened it and withdrew a photograph. "Look."

Farrell scrutinized the glossy print.

"That proves your point," he admitted. "The camera isn't subject to hallucina-

tions or delusions of persecution. Antoinette has been beaten. Severely. The old black-and-blue marks photographed darker than the new, red welts. No argument. I'm not, she isn't, you're not bug-house. That is, *not yet*. But if this doesn't stop soon——"

He bit the tip off a fresh cigar, chewed it for a moment, struck light.

"Let us be impersonal about it for a moment," suggested d'Artois, "and consider what we have.

"First, she tells us that her dreams have become so real that she is confused and wonders during the day which is dream, and which is reality. She dreams that she is in an outlandishly beautiful garden, dim as by moonlight, yet warm as the glow of morning sun. The plants are strange, and the flowers have an unnatural, poison sweetness.

"And strangest of all, she herself has a different body, brown-skinned, with blue-black hair, and very large, dark eyes. The other girls, her companions, are also dark," summarized d'Artois. "Now do you see how her first speech in this troubled sleep begins to lend a touch of rationality?"

Farrell pondered for a moment, then replied.

"Yes. Those few words she spoke in Arabic tonight suggest a dual personality, give us a bit more background. But on the other hand, didn't she tell us that she couldn't understand the language of the other girls, and of the guests: lean, swarthy fellows with staring, dilated eyes? If she couldn't understand them, how the devil is she talking the fluent, unsavory Arabic of a dancing-girl in a Port Said dive?"

"That sudden gift of tongues can be resolved," said d'Artois. "There is something else, which is perhaps more relevant: the veiled Master, whom the

guests of the garden regard with great reverence. Does that suggest anything?"

"It does, and it doesn't," replied Farrell. "'Way back in my mind it's there, but I can't express it. And you, I fancy, are in about the same fix?"

"I am," admitted d'Artois. "But before many days pass, we will pick up the trail. We will have this invisible wielder of an unseen scourge. Him, or his hide. But now get yourself some sleep, *mon ami*."

Farrell glanced at the door at his left.

"She'll be all right," assured d'Artois. "The ordeal is over. And what purpose did we serve, after all?"

"Guess you're right, Pierre," assented Farrell. "Let's go."

2. *La Dorada*

GLENN FARRELL was up at dawn. His carefully tiptoeing down the winding stairway of Pierre d'Artois' house, however, was wasted consideration. He found that gray-haired *ferrailleur* hunched over the littered desk of his study, fuming and muttering in a thick, foul cloud of smoke that momentarily became more dense as the cigarette between d'Artois' fingers added its stench of burning rags. The shining brass pot of Syrian workmanship, and half a dozen tiny cups, each with a thick residue of pulverized coffee grounds and cigarette stumps, indicated that the old man had been at work ever since they had left Antoinette Delatour some six hours ago.

In the clear space in front of d'Artois was an open book whose pages were in illuminated Arabic script. Beside it were a pad of note-paper and a half-dozen loose sheets closely scribbled.

"Pierre, why didn't you tell me you were going to carry on?" reproached Farrell as he drew up a chair. "This is really

more my funeral than yours, getting Antoinette out of this terrible mess."

"*Mordieu!*" exclaimed d'Artois. "This is work for a scholar, not a towering blockhead like yourself."

"Oh, all right, all right," said Farrell with a smile that for a moment cleared his features of the dismay and wrath of the preceding night. "Only, I can read that stuff myself, almost as well as you can." He scrutinized the book for a moment; then, indicating the title, he said, "*Siret al Haken*—how's that for a blockhead?"

"Very good," approved d'Artois. Then, with a wink and a grin, "And after all, perhaps I should not call you a blockhead, even though I do exceed you in intelligence and in skill with the sword."

He paused a moment after that time-honored raillery in which each reviled the other's talents, then continued, "But seriously, I have been pursuing some exceedingly roundabout speculations, and before I inflicted them on you, I wanted to study them out myself."

"Oh, all right, then," agreed Farrell as he found a clean *demi-tasse* and poured some of the lukewarm, sirupy Turkish coffee with which d'Artois drugged himself during his midnight studies. "But I see no connection with the *Memoirs of Haken* and Antoinette's terrible predicament."

"Listen then, I will enlighten you!" began d'Artois. "Mademoiselle Antoinette has been dreaming of a garden rich with roses, and lilies, and jasmine. It is alive with strangely colored birds. In fact, she described the very garden"—d'Artois indicated the page of Arabic script before him—"that Haken has so glowingly described: lovely girls playing the *sitar* and the *oudb*, and entertaining the guests of paradise with song and wine. And a veiled master who ruled the garden."

"But what," demanded Farrell, "has that to do with those unmerciful beatings? How about it?"

"Did I not say that I was working indirectly?" countered d'Artois. "The scourgings, you understand, did not come until later, after the dreams had recurred for some time. Therefore they must be but an indication of the gradual increase—"

"Of the undoubted insanity of all three of us!" interpolated Farrell.

"Mademoiselle Antoinette," declared d'Artois, ignoring his friend's outburst, "is not dreaming. She actually spends her nights in that devil's paradise. She awakes and tells us that she had another body; but her *self* retained its identity. I conclude then that her personality, her spiritual essence, whatever you will, is wandering, driven by some damnable compulsion to inhabit that garden, and a strange body."

Farrell sighed wearily and shook his head.

"This scrambling of selves and personalities is enough to drive one nutty. It doesn't make any sense."

"Ah, say you so?" murmured d'Artois as he reached for another cigarette. "My logic is scrambled, in that I have not attempted to show *how* this can be; but by assuming that it is, I get to the next point."

"Listen somewhat further, yes? We have but to find that place which Antoinette's physical body, speaking like a Syrian dancing-girl, so graphically damned and called *junayn' ash-Shaytan*, Satan's garden.

"There is such a garden at this moment in physical existence; or else there is one which, reaching out of the dimness of nine hundred departed years, is *en rapport* with Antoinette."

"Hell's fire!" muttered Farrell. "The

ghost of a garden haunting a woman in Bayonne, in 1933!"

D'Artois tapped the cover of *Siret al Haken*.

"The author," he said, "tells of Hassan al Sabbah. *Shaykh al Djibal*, the Chief of the Mountains. The lord of the *Hasib-sheen*—"

"I get it!" exclaimed Farrell. "The garden paradise into which hasheesh-drugged devotees were tossed while unconscious, so that when they awoke they would believe themselves to be in the Moslem heaven of cool water, beautiful women, and forbidden wine?"

"Precisely, my excellent blockhead! I drink to your wit!" said d'Artois with a smile that flashed over the edge of his cup of cold coffee. "And your Antoinette is bedeviled in some way by a garden like that of Hassan al Sabbah, the master of those assassins who terrorized all Syria and Persia, centuries ago."

Farrell grimaced.

"Worse and worse yet! Hasn't this old city of Bayonne got enough ghosts and devils in its own right, lurking under the blood-soaked foundations of the citadel, without importing them from Asia?" His eyes shifted to the clustered simitars and yataghans, kreeses and kampilans, darts and assegais that adorned the walls of the study. "Now if they were men, we might do something about it!"

"Have no fear on that score," assured d'Artois. "We find that every phantom as malignantly directed as this ghostly garden has a man pulling the strings—a flesh-and-blood man you can neatly riddle with bullets, or slice asunder with some of those toys up there on the wall."

Farrell smiled grimly and took heart.

"Reasonable, at that. And now, suppose that we drop in and see what Antoinette has to say about her newly ac-

quired gift of Arabic speech. It took me several years to learn that fluently."

"Barbarian!" scoffed d'Artois. "It is too early. You with your military hours—"

"And you're another," countered Farrell. "Working the clock around. But see if you can persuade Félice to scramble some eggs, at least a pound of bacon, and perhaps a stack of waffles."

"*Magnifique!*" agreed d'Artois. "Some of those barbarous American customs of yours are not utterly vile. And since you so kindly sent me an electric waffle-iron, à l'*Américain*—but as a lover, you are most unconvincing! At six of the morning, you howl for food—utterly out of keeping! Romance is dead, slain by such as you."

"Ghosts," submitted Farrell, "can not be fought on an empty stomach."

BREAKFAST stemmed Farrell's impatience for a while; but as they lingered over the brandy-laden coffee, he proposed again that they set out at once to call on Antoinette Delatour.

"Or at least, let's stretch our legs and get the air. I'll be turning flip-flops if I don't get going."

"The air, then," agreed d'Artois. "Look! It is but little past eight."

So saying, d'Artois selected one of his collection of canes and led the way down the stairs of the restored ruin which served as his town house. The circular donjon dated back to the Thirteenth Century; the remainder, though not so ancient, was old when Columbus set sail; and the narrow street on which it faced was in accord with those far-off days, crooked, dingy, and paved with cobblestones. Yet, being in the heart of that colorful city which he loved so well, d'Artois was content, and with the modernization of the interior, he contrived to be comfortable.

They strolled along the *quai* that follows the Nive to its junction with the Adour, then turned to the left toward Place du Théâtre. Before crossing the street that skirted the plaza, d'Artois paused a moment at the curbing to give the right of way to the glittering, costly Italian car which was approaching, presumably from the Biarritz road. The chauffeur and footman were in livery; and the crest on the door was one that d'Artois recognized as that of the Marquis des Islots. Farrell, however, being ignorant of heraldry, had eyes only for the passenger in the back seat: a dazzlingly beautiful girl whose costly furs and sparkling jewels betokened a background as golden as her hair. Her lovely features were drawn and weary, and her eyes haggard and blue-ringed.

"Good Lord, Pierre!" he exclaimed as he clutched his friend by the arm. "Did you see—for a moment I thought——"

He blinked, passed his hand over his eyes, then sought to catch another glimpse of the beauty in the back seat.

"And what did you for a moment think?" wondered d'Artois, as the car rolled majestically toward the Mayou bridge. His voice was grave, but his blue eyes twinkled.

"I thought it was Antoinette," said Farrell, still perplexed. "Or else I'm seeing things!"

"My friend," said d'Artois reprovingly, as they crossed the street, "let Antoinette ever hear that you mistook La Dorada for her!" He shook his head in solemn warning. "Blasphemy, you understand. *Lèse majesté!*"

"But doesn't she——" began Farrell, his gray eyes still narrowed with perplexity.

"Truly! She does just that," admitted d'Artois. "Antoinette has often been accosted at Biarritz and Santander by ad-

mirers of La Dorada. But on second glance, their error becomes apparent, unless they are strangers. A similarity of coloring, perhaps a likeness of posture or mannerism that would deceive one only for a moment, if one knew either woman well. Had you been able to look again—anyway, La Dorada is the current playmate of *Monsieur* the Marquis des Islots. She was in his car, and on her way to his château where she is spending the season. Doubtless she is returning from a night of baccarat or roulette at Biarritz."

"Returning? At this hour?" wondered Farrell.

D'Artois smiled and nodded.

"You do not know La Dorada. She got the name in Madrid, where she was discovered by a *café* proprietor and sponsored by a grande of Spain. La Dorada, the gilded, the golden."

As they passed along the broad plaza, then to the left and up the slope of rue Port Neuf, d'Artois held forth at length concerning the colorful career of La Dorada who at first glance so strikingly resembled Antoinette Delatour.

At the head of rue Port Neuf they turned to the left, past the old cathedral whose tall spires tower like silver lance-heads into the morning light, and ascended the incline to the broad drive that follows the parapet of the Lachepaillet wall.

DESPITE the barbarity of the hour, they found that Antoinette had disposed of her morning chocolate and rolls. She wore a negligée of jade chiffon whose curled ostrich trimming fluffed up about her ears and caressed the copper-golden hair that enhanced her resemblance to La Dorada. Her lips smiled, but her dark blue eyes were somber and haunted as she greeted Farrell and d'Artois.

"*Hélas!* It was worse than ever, last night," she replied, with a despairing

gesture, to Farrell's solicitous inquiry. "But be seated, and I will tell you."

She shifted her feet to make room for Farrell at the foot of the chaise-longue on which she reclined; then, as d'Artois drew up a chair, Antoinette continued, "It was terribly clear! Just fancy: my hair was jet-black, and so were my eyes. And my skin was as dark as an Arab's! They beat me most unmercifully . . . as usual."

She shuddered at the memory of the dream. D'Artois stared at the dainty feet and their turquoise and silver mules. As Antoinette was about to resume her remarks, he said abruptly, "In your dream, what have you been wearing? On your ankles, I mean."

Antoinette closed her eyes for a moment to visualize her dream.

"Heavy golden anklets set with massive uncut stones," she replied. "Emeralds, I think. But why?"

"Were they *very* heavy?" persisted d'Artois.

Farrell regarded him curiously, wondering how adornments could be relevant to the case.

"Terribly so!" assured Antoinette. Then, with a wan smile, "Only, I've become used to them."

"Look!" commanded d'Artois, indicating the girl's ankles.

"Well I'll be damned!" exclaimed Farrell, and frowned perplexedly. Then he glanced at his left hand and shifted the heavy signet on his finger. "Her ankles are marked just as my finger is by this heavy slug of a ring!"

"*Voilà!* That further indicates an interchange of bodies during the night!" declared d'Artois. "As a Syrian dancing-girl you are beaten, and the welts appear on the body of Antoinette Delatour. And the heavy anklets of the Syrian girl mark your daytime body just as they leave prints on her."

"Now what else do you remember, *ma petite*? Your impressions become more distinct each time, *n'est-ce pas?* Your recollections——"

"Exactly," she assented. "And last night—oh, I know I'm becoming utterly mad!—the veiled Master was accompanied by a man who walked through the garden with him."

"And how," wondered d'Artois, "is that more peculiar than the rest of the dream?"

"The Master's companion," replied Antoinette, "is the Marquis des Islots! *Mon Dieu*, is the whole city of Bayonne bound for this devil's garden?"

"What?" D'Artois started and glanced sharply at Antoinette, then at Farrell. "Monsieur le Marquis has been added to her dream. Do you see any connection?"

"I don't," confessed Farrell. "After all this madhouse she's been through, might it not be a fancied recognition? Pure imagination?"

"*Cordieu!*" exclaimed d'Artois. "Would she not sooner imagine that she saw ibn Saoud, or Saladin? That would be more in keeping. *Diable!* Her seeing Monsieur le Marquis is so wide of any fancy that I am now convinced that she is not dreaming."

"Eh, what's that?" demanded Farrell, aghast at the wildness of d'Artois' implication. "That it wasn't a dream? Good Lord, man——"

The recurrent nightmare had driven Antoinette Delatour to the verge of distraction, so that d'Artois' contention did not amaze her as much as it did Farrell.

"*Mon Dieu,*" she sighed wearily, and took Farrell's hand. "It's all become such a terrific confusion . . . I don't know who I am. Oh, how my poor back aches from that beating!"

"Courage, my dear!" reassured d'Ar-

tois. "The enemy has slipped." Then, to Farrell, "Allons! Let us get to work at once. I have several of those hunches."

"The quicker the better, Pierre," agreed Farrell. And as Antoinette's slender arms released him, he followed d'Artois down the stairs to the street.

3. *The Hand of Hassan*

"YOUR task, my friend," began d'Artois as, back again at his house, they sat down to plan their campaign against the phantom garden, "will be to watch at the plaza. You will loaf, and drink an occasional *apéritif*, and smoke your way into the day. You may see nothing; but with time and patience your watch will have results. All of Bayonne passes the plaza, sooner or later."

"But what," wondered Farrell, "am I to look for?"

"People who show signs of hasheesh intoxication, particularly Arabs or other Orientals," answered d'Artois. "You know the symptoms. You have seen enough *hasheeshin* in Egypt and Syria. I need not describe their manner, or peculiar stare. We are in search of addicts who in addition are fanatic Moslems. A slender clue at best, but while you pursue that, something else may happen."

"And I, in the meanwhile, will be doing some private snooping of my own. This *Monsieur* the Marquis des Islots is due for an investigation. That one has an open reputation for dabbling in obscure arts, and not such a savory reputation either."

"But," protested Farrell, "how do hasheesh addicts come into this?"

"Listen, I will enlighten you," began d'Artois. "We mentioned the Assassins, the followers of Hassan al Sabbah, the terrible Chief of the Mountains, *n'est-ce pas?* Those Assassins were of the fanatic

Ismailian sect of Moslems. Those guests of the garden mentioned in this book"—d'Artois indicated *Siret al Haken*, lying open on the desk—"actually believed that their master had the power of admitting them to paradise for brief visits, at the end of which they were drugged, and dragged forth to awaken once more on earth, and ready for any infamy that might be demanded as the price of returning to the garden."

"I have all that," admitted Farrell. "All right, then?"

"The sect of the Ismailians," continued d'Artois, "was more than religious. It was political. Its members did not content themselves with theory. And if, as Antoinette's strange dreams indicate, we have a nest of Ismailians—that is, *hasheeshin*—to contend with, sooner or later one or more of them will be noted about town."

"As for Antoinette, it is quite possible that she is, without being aware of it, *clairvoyante*. And thus *Monsieur le Marquis* will bear investigation. Do you therefore stand watch as I directed, while I pursue some private snooping. *A bientôt!*"

Whereat d'Artois turned to his desk, leaving Farrell to go to the plaza and seek a table under the striped awning of the café.

FARRELL was none too optimistic, but upon his arrival at *Café du Théâtre* he assumed an indolence that in any place but southern France would have seemed a pose. But in Bayonne the enjoyment of placid idleness is an ancient art: and thus it was eminently suitable for him to sit and watch the smoke spiralling from the cigarette that smoldered between his fingers.

All of the Bayonnais, and all visitors, eventually pass the plaza: Portuguese and

Spanish and Italian sailors, Arabs from Algiers and Morocco, Basques from the hills; English tourists on their way to the arcades of rue Port Neuf, where they found the only *épiceries* in Bayonne where they could buy Scotch whisky; peasants, loafers, soldiers on leave; quietly dressed and unpainted girls who had left behind them, in their rooms beyond the Nive, all the gauds and garniture of their profession. Costly imported cars flashed by, to cross Pont Mayou and Pont de Saint Esprit; ox-carts lumbered past, the drivers, arrayed in dingy smocks, trudging along and reviling their placid beasts. Bayonne marched by in review; and Farrell watched the parade.

But despite his apparent idleness, Farrell's gray eyes were occupied with more than wisps of smoke, and the tall glass of *anis del oso* that sat on the marble-topped table before him. Without in the least shifting his slightly bowed head, he was peering between his drooping eye-lashes at the passers-by, and at the boulevardiers who like himself sat sipping the meridional *apéritif*.

He was particularly interested in the trio that sat two tables to his right, where they could command a view of rue Port Neuf as well as the street that led to the Mayou bridge. They were swarthy and aquiline-featured. Two were Syrian Arabs; but the third, despite his dark skin and foreign air, was no Semite, but an Aryan: a Kurd from Kurdistan, one of those fierce mountaineers who in their native land are the terror of Turk and Persian alike. Yet the trio had kinship in at least one feature: the dilated pupils and the staring glassiness of their eyes.

As Farrell raised his glass and sniffed the odor of the cloudy drink, he smelled trouble as well as *anis del oso*. D'Artois' somber hints were having substantial realization. Farrell's first reaction was to

loosen the pistol in his shoulder holster. The peculiar stare of their eyes convinced Farrell that he had picked up the trail of that which d'Artois felt would lead to the source of the bedevilment of Antoinette's nights.

Farrell continued his apparent enjoyment of idleness. His broad shoulders slumped. He languidly passed his fingers through his sandy hair; but for all his efforts to maintain his poise, his long, lean frame was tense, and chills raced up and down his spine, despite the warmth of the day.

He summoned the waiter and called for brandy.

Then he noted that an exotic, imported car was coming to a smooth halt at the curbing. A footman in livery opened the door and stood at attention as a woman emerged from the rich upholstery and silver and cut glass of the town car that bore the crest of the Marquis des Islots.

Farrell recognized the woman as La Dorada. He wondered, as he saw her step to the curbing, why a carpet had not been unrolled to keep her feet from the contamination of the paving. The scarcely perceptible breeze wafted a breath of perfume whose cost rumor had for once fallen short of exaggerating.

La Dorada was passing the table of the trio from Asia. The one facing the Mayou bridge made a gesture. His lips moved. At that distance, Farrell could not hear what he said. La Dorada apparently paid no attention to the murmur. She was accustomed to whispered admiration.

Farrell ignored the warning of his intuition: it was too unbelievable and outrageous.

Then it happened. The Kurd, who faced Farrell, leaped cat-like to his feet. A knife flashed in his hand. La Dorada started at Farrell's warning cry, and add-

ed her own note of dismay as she saw his hand with an incredibly swift gesture seek his armpit.

"Smack-smack-smack!" roared the heavy automatic.

The Kurd pitched backward to the paving, groaning and clutching his stomach.

But even as Farrell drew and fired, the Syrian whose back had been turned to Farrell leaped from his place. And the knife he held found its mark, full in the breast of La Dorada.

The pistol spoke, but too late. Even as the impact of the heavy slug bowled the Syrian over in a heap, his blade sank home.

La Dorada screamed, reeled, and collapsed, clutching the dagger whose hilt projected beyond the blood-splashed fur collar of her coat.

As he leaped forward, pistol in hand, Farrell knew that she would be beyond assistance. A shot at the survivor of the trio was impossible, and pursuit was futile. Waiters, patrons of the *café*, and passers-by clustered about the dying beauty. In the confusion Farrell heard the clash of gears and caught a glimpse of a car tearing madly down toward the road leading to Maracq.

La Dorada moaned, and shuddered.

"Hassan——" she articulated with an effort. Then she coughed, and gasped. A red foam flecked her red lips.

THE arrival of a pair of gendarmes, and, a few minutes later, a passing doctor, scattered the dense cluster of frantically gesticulating citizens.

"Monsieur," said one of the gendarmes, who had seen Farrell holster his automatic, "be pleased to accompany us. Purely as a matter of form, you understand. It is plainly evident that that one——"

He indicated the second of the assassi-

sins that Farrell's pistol fire had bowled over.

Farrell shrugged. It would be awkward for a stranger in town to be dragged into the formalities of a police investigation; and doubly annoying in view of his having a serious problem of his own to handle.

"Very well, *monsieur*," agreed Farrell with a wry grimace.

Then he saw d'Artois emerge from the fringe of the crowd that still persisted, at a distance of several paces. He whispered in the ear of the gendarme—only a few words, but they sufficed.

The gendarme turned from d'Artois to Farrell.

"Your pardon, *monsieur*. You may call on us at your leisure. It was routine, you comprehend."

Farrell in his turn bowed, and followed d'Artois to his car, eager to be clear of the plaza. And as they drove past the parkway that lies between the road to Maracq and the wall of Lachepaillet, Farrell gave his companion an account of the assassination.

"*Sacré nom d'un nom!*" swore d'Artois at the conclusion of the narrative. "That is the technique of the Fifth Order of the Ismailians. They worked in threes, so that if the first and second were cut down, the third would nevertheless slay the victim.

"They hunted Saladin seven hundred years ago. They slew Nizam ul Mulk. The Sultan of Cairo, Baibars the Panther, barely escaped them. They terrorized the Near East until Tamerlane in his wrath took by assault their almost impregnable castle of Alamut, tore it down stone by stone, and put to the sword 12,000 Ismailians. But the order persisted, though its power has been broken for these past five centuries, thanks to the savage efficiency of Tamerlane.

"And I am thoroughly convinced," continued d'Artois, "that you witnessed a recrudescence of that plague which ate at the heart of the Moslem world for several centuries. They seem to be branching out again. Even as during the Crusades they assassinated Conrad of Montferrat, so are they again carrying secret war against the infidel."

"But why," demanded Farrell, "did they strike La Dorada in the public square? They could have killed her stealthily. Even though they could not foresee that I would shoot two of them down in their tracks, the other spectators or the police might have killed or captured them."

"You miss the point," declared d'Artois, "which is pardonable, since even your extensive travels in the Orient would not of necessity bring you into contact with the Ismailians. They killed her in public as an example to instill terror in others. It is a matter of history that Ismailian assassins were often ordered to slay a dignitary and to make no attempt at escape. In one case the slayer struck, then sat down and began eating his travel rations of bread and dates, calmly awaiting the guard that would drag him to the executioner and impalement on a sharpened stake. The besotted *hasbeeshin* faced a horrible doom for the sake of re-entrance to the paradise with which their master duped them. The utter fearlessness and indifference to death and torture aroused more terror than the assassinations they perpetrated.

"So much for the *fedawi*, or Devoted Ones, Ismailians of the Fifth Order. The first four orders were the Grand Master, the Grand Priors, and simple priors, or initiates; and then a grade known as *rafiqs*, or associates. These upper grades were intelligent persons who after sufficient study in the free-thinking, heretical

doctrines of the Ismailians would be eligible for the highest offices in the Order.

"The Ismailians became a state within a state; they undermined Persia and Syria, and for several centuries exacted tribute from sultans and emirs, with summary vengeance as the penalty of non-payment, very much," concluded d'Artois, with a malicious grin, "like those racketeers they have in your United States. That should make it clear!"

"But how," wondered Farrell, "does Antoinette fit into all this?"

"The companions and initiates of the Ismailians," replied d'Artois, "were adepts in alchemy, magic, conjuring, and occult arts. They used Islam as a mask for all manner of forbidden heresies and as bait to attract the pious oafs and religious fanatics who did the actual slaying and—how does one say it, à l'*Américain*?—and took the rap!"

"Maymun the Persian founded the order. A free-thinker, heretic, and magician, he fled from the wrath of the Khalif Mansur, with his son Abdallah, to whom he imparted all his vast knowledge of medicine, conjuring, and occultism. And Abdallah built up on this start by promising the return of the vanished Seventh Imam, who had never died, but who was waiting for the day to return and rule all Islam. They still wait for the return of Ismail, the Seventh Imam. And in the meanwhile, behold the deviltry with which they amuse themselves, bewitching Antoinette, slaying La Dorada—*le bon Dieu* can only say what will come next."

They drew up at d'Artois' house as he concluded his refreshing of Farrell's memory on the origin of the menace that had taken root in Bayonne.

"How about my watching the plaza?" wondered Farrell as Raoul admitted them.

"You have watched enough," declared d'Artois. "In fact, you have made your-

self so painfully conspicuous that from now on I will have to watch you more closely than Mademoiselle Antoinette, or you will be found full of daggers yourself."

"Nuts, Pierre!" protested Farrell. "I've been away from home before, and I'm used to being hunted."

"Nevertheless, be on your guard," cautioned the old man.

4. *Shirkub Makes Magic*

THAT evening, after dinner, d'Artois' man, Raoul, entered the study with a large envelope that had just been delivered by a messenger.

D'Artois glanced at the large waxen seal that secured the flap.

"The crest of *Monsieur le Marquis*," he observed. Then, with a wink and a grin at Farrell, he continued, "Like Satan in the first lines of the Book of Job, I wandered up and down the world, and in it, particularly at Biarritz, and somewhat about the estate of our good Marquis. But need I assure you that if my presence was noted, it was also amply accounted for? *Mais oui*, of a verity!"

He slit the envelope and withdrew an engraved invitation.

"Hmmm . . . *Monsieur le Marquis* requests the honor of my presence at a *soirée* at his château. The Thaumaturgical Order of Thoth is meeting in open conclave."

"Wait a minute," interrupted Farrell. "There's something fishy about this. La Dorada, his sweetheart, is murdered around noon. And now he sends you an invitation to—what was it?—some kind of juggler's convention. Anyway, it's utterly out of keeping. Not only inhumanly callous, but damned poor form; no matter what his private morals may be, a man of his station would have better manners!"

"Granted," acquiesced d'Artois. "But consider: this thaumaturgical society may be depending upon the meeting-place designated, and can not postpone it for the sake of one man's grief. That there is such an order has been for some time an open secret. Then, he himself may be absent from the conclave, even though it assembled in his name. Or again," continued d'Artois, "it is even possible that Monsieur the Marquis does not know of La Dorada's death."

"Absurd!" objected Farrell. "In a town this small——"

"Wait!" interrupted d'Artois. "Remember Antoinette's dream: the Marquis walked through the garden with the veiled Master. He may still be in that garden, not to emerge until the hour of the *soirée*."

"By the rod, that's possible," agreed Farrell. "Since La Dorada was presumably killed by the Ismailians, the Marquis may be in their hands, dead, or a prisoner."

"Now, as to this invitation," continued d'Artois, "it may be a device to exact vengeance for your excellent pistol practise. Their espionage would inform them that you, my friend and guest, would surely accompany me to the *soirée*.

"But mark you this: they can scarcely know that your Antoinette could tell you of seeing the Marquis in the garden. That, you comprehend, is the information that ties the scattered ends together, and makes their otherwise subtle trap seem obvious to us."

"My friend, do we go and defy them, or shall we stay at home?"

Farrell laughed.

"Pierre, you're comical at times! We'll go, and be damned to them and their trap. We can shoot our way out of any handful of knife-artists they throw at us, what?"

"Ha! Is it that you are informing me?" scoffed d'Artois with a fierce gleam in his steel-blue eyes. "Voilà—have your choice of my arsenal," he said, gesturing at his collection of pistols, ranging from flintlocks and cap-and-ball antiques to heavy Colt revolvers and automatics. "And perhaps, since we shall be outnumbered, we might slip into those shirts of Persian chain-mail. They are not much heavier than a sweater, and so exquisitely forged as to be proof against knives and any but the heaviest pistols. *Parbleu*, we will attend that conclave!"

After arraying themselves as d'Artois had suggested, they dressed for a formal evening affair.

"Thaumaturgy . . . thaumaturgy . . ." muttered Farrell as they stepped into the Renault and d'Artois took the wheel. "Wonder, or miracle workers, what?"

"Precisely," agreed d'Artois. "Jugglery, sleight of hand, trickery, but withal, an underlying substratum of fact that can not be dismissed. I myself have seen unbelievable things done by the adepts of Tibet. A corpse, *par exemple*, animated and made to dance by some devilish magic. The fact of my having been admitted to their inner circles in Tibet has in time leaked out; and it is to this that they would expect us to attribute my receiving tonight's invitation."

THE château of the Marquis was out in the hills beyond the Mousserole Gate. It was perched on a knoll that commanded the surrounding country. Several cars were parked in a level space near the entrance.

"It seems," observed Farrell, "that there are other guests, although that may or may not mean anything."

D'Artois presented his invitation to the butler.

"Monsieur le Chevalier Pierre d'Ar-

tois," he intoned in impressive but oddly accented French. Then he glanced at Farrell.

D'Artois interposed and instructed the butler, who then announced Farrell.

They advanced through the vestibule and thence into the salon, a vast, high-ceiled chamber illuminated by a pulsing bluish glow. The walls were hung with black arras embroidered in silver to depict with unsavory realism the grotesque imagery of Asian mysteries. At the far end of the salon was a dais flanked by tall tripod-censers whose pungent, resinous fumes made the air thick.

The assembled guests were in formal evening dress. There were Spaniards with black mustaches, and Frenchmen with spade-shaped beards; and here and there Farrell saw lean, hawk-faced Arabs, and several distinctly Mongolian faces.

"More guests than the number of cars would indicate," muttered Farrell, nudging d'Artois. "This is all very flossy, but I smell trouble."

"And no Marquis," added d'Artois with a quick glance about the salon. Then he advanced to meet the man who seemed to be acting as host. After the exchange of a few words, d'Artois presented Farrell.

In the course of the conventional courtesies, Farrell appraised the master of the show. He was lean as a beast of prey, and as sleek. His moves and gestures had a cat-like grace, and his speech had the indefinable blur of accent that marks one who speaks many languages with equal ease.

"And thus I have the honor," concluded the host, "of offering in the name of *Monsieur le Marquis* his regrets and the hospitality of his house."

He paused for a moment, regarding them with his intent, deep-set eyes; then with a gesture toward a row of chairs

arranged before the dais, "Be pleased to seat yourselves, *messieurs*."

Farrell watched the broad shoulders and tall figure pass among the guests like a cat stalking through a jungle.

"Shirkuh of the clan of Shadi," muttered Farrell. "Ought to be an honest fighting-man, but——"

"'But' is correct," interrupted d'Artois. "There is nothing honest about that playmate of Satan. Mark my words, we shall see more of that gentleman, if we live long enough."

As they seated themselves there was a clang of bronze, and the faint, muffled wailing of pipes and the whine of single-stringed *kemenjabs* from an alcove behind the arras. As the guests took seats, an attendant passed up and down the rows of chairs, offering small glasses of wine, and triangular pastries iced in curious designs.

"On your life, don't eat it!" muttered d'Artois as he palmed a confection he had selected from the tray. "Drugged, there is no telling what may happen to your good sense. This is all damnably familiar."

Another peal of bronze; then, as Shirkuh sprang effortlessly to the dais, the music dimmed to a sighing whisper, a sinister murmuring from outer darkness.

Six lean, brown men, nude save for loin-cloths that glowed like golden flames in the spectral bluish light, emerged from an entrance concealed by the silver-embroidered arras, and filed across the hall toward the dais. Following them came four others, likewise arrayed, but blacker than any negroes Farrell had ever seen. They bore a litter on which lay a form whose gracious feminine curves were not entirely concealed by the silken, metallically glistening shroud.

"Good Lord!" muttered Farrell. "A woman!"

The brown-skinned sextet ascended the dais. The blacks followed with their burden. As they halted, two others emerged from the back-drapes of the dais, bringing with them wrought bronze trestles on which the litter was placed.

SHIRKUH took his post behind the litter as the sextet of adepts from High Asia seated themselves cross-legged in front of it.

"Fellow thaumaturges," he began, "I, the least of your servants, beg leave to present a feat that has never been accomplished save in far-off Lhasa."

He paused, smiled, and stroked his mustache. Then he gestured toward the shrouded form on the litter. An attendant gathered the silken folds and drew them aside.

Farrell barely suppressed a gasp of horrified amazement.

The woman on the bier was La Dorada. Her copper-golden hair flamed like living fire in the bluish-purple, pulsing light of the room. The hands, folded across her breast, sparkled with jewels. She had no other adornment or dress. La Dorada, the Golden, dead not over ten hours, and stripped of all but her exquisite beauty, lay exposed to the gaze of that assemblage of devil-mongers. For one terrible instant Farrell had thought that Antoinette lay on that bier; then he remembered her resemblance to the dead actress, and assured himself that Antoinette was and must be in her apartment on rue Lachepaillet, awaiting another night of fantastic dreams of an assassin's paradise, and the lashing of an invisible scourge.

"*Monsieur le Marquis*," continued Shirkuh with a smile that flashed satanic mockery, "is unable to be with us. But I trust that that which I offer will be worthy of your presence."

"Lord!" muttered Farrell. "I don't know the Marquis, but exhibiting her dead body here in his house—I've half a notion to start the show right here!"

D'Artois' fingers closed about Farrell's right wrist.

"*Imbécile!* This infamy is none of your business. Tend to your own sheep."

Shirkuh nodded and made a gesture. The faint, whimpering music became louder. Among the plucked strings of *sitar* and *oudh* Farrell could distinguish the notes of a wind instrument that was a mockery of a woman's voice. The drums muttered and purred in complex rhythm.

The adepts were swaying from their hips, and making statuesque passes and gestures that resembled an animation of the figures of Egyptian sculpture. Their glassily staring eyes shifted in regular cadence to follow their darting finger tips. They were as revivified corpses that had not yet gained full control of their bodies.

Then they lifted their voices in a chant like the wailing of ghouls imprisoned in a looted tomb: dead brazen faces chanting to the dead. And Shirkuh, arms extended, made antiphonal responses in a voice that surged and thundered like a distant surf.

The notes of that diabolical wind instrument behind the arras became more and more like the voice of a woman: a mellow sweetness against a background of sepulchral wailing and the solemn intonation of Shirkuh.

"Good Lord, Pierre, that's awful!" muttered Farrell.

"Wait until it fairly starts," countered d'Artois in a whisper. "This is primitive magic. Very primitive, but deadly. They are imitating that which they design to accomplish.

"*Pardieu*, hear that damnable pipe—
W. T.—2

her very voice, now. They imitate in music and symbolize in their chant the triumph of the dead as they return from Beyond."

That satanically sweet voice was now almost articulate. Farrell strained his ears as he leaned forward, clutching the arms of his chair. He sought to distinguish the words that it spoke. And then another instrument came into play: a hoarse, reverberant roaring like the lustful bellowing of pre-Adamite monsters. The hall trembled with that terrific bestial blast.

The fumes of the censers were swirling and twining like fantasmal serpents in the ghastly blueness, weaving arabesques, spiralling in vortices, gathering about that hellish sextet and its leader like shapes from beyond the border clamoring at the periphery of a necromancer's pentacle.

A luminous haze was gathering and drawing to itself the censer fumes. The nebulous iridescence pulsed and quivered like a sentient thing. It throbbed with the slow, persistent beat of a turtle's heart after it has been removed from the body. It elongated; then as it slowly settled, that amorphous luminescence took shape: the graceful form of La Dorada.

The pipe that mimicked a woman's voice was articulating now in unison, joining the necromancer's antiphonal answer to the chanting adepts and the minotaurean bellowing of that monstrous horn.

The master had called her, and she was there.

The phantom presence slowly merged with the nacreous body of La Dorada. The dead woman shivered for a moment, extended her shapely arms, sat erect on the bier. Her cry was a mingling of exultation and bewilderment; then she accepted the hand that Shirkuh offered

her, and splendid in her unclad beauty, sprang gracefully to the dais.

The music and the chanting and the bestial roaring of that terrific horn had ceased. The assembled thaumaturges sat fixed and staring as though their life and their spiritual essence had been torn from them and given to the dead who saluted them with a gesture and a bow.

Shirkuh smiled triumphantly.

"You have seen, Brethren. I called her and she came. And I am but Shirkuh, the least of the slaves. See, she is alive, with the warmth and beauty that at noon of this very day was a coldness, and a sister of the dust."

The red-gold head inclined in affirmation, and her smile was a slow, curved sorcery.

"Good God, that's the awfulest blasphemy!" muttered Farrell. "Or is it an illusion?"

"It is all too real," whispered d'Artois.

AND then she spoke: "I have come back from the shadows and from the blackness of death. I have come to greet you and to say that there is a Garden to which I must soon return. And those who meet me there need not ever think of farewell.

"I came from across the narrow bridge, and back across it I must go. Yet not this time to any blackness, but to the Garden, to be the Bride and the reward and the welcome of those who believe. Oh, *Fedawi* . . . Devoted Ones. . . ."

La Dorada, lovely in death, and more alluring than ever in life: yet a cold horror clutched Farrell as he heard that dead woman's caressing voice entrance the thaumaturges with promises that no human woman could fulfill or even imagine. Her voice was a poison sweetness, a full-throated richness that pronounced the be-

guilements of Lilith chanting to the Morning Star.

"Death so loved me that he has allowed me to leave," she said in that wondrous voice that had made her the darling of Paris. And then her exultant tones became a poignant sorrow as she continued, "But the beloved of death must return. . . ."

"*Cordieu!* That is a foulness beyond mention!" growled d'Artois. Then:

"Let's go! Before we go utterly mad——"

He leaped to his feet and thrust back his chair. And as Farrell followed, he expected at any instant a fanatical outburst, the flash of blades, the crackle of pistols. But the thaumaturges sat like the ancient dead awaiting the newly died.

La Dorada was ascending the bier. Her motions were graceful, but very slow, as though the animation was being drained from her body. She was dying a second time.

This as they paused at the threshold for a backward glance; then, advancing, Farrell and d'Artois sighed deeply, and strode to the Renault. The hideous life-like unreality had dazed them.

"*Dieu de Dieu!*" muttered d'Artois as he glanced at Farrell's lean, drawn features, and shoulders drooping as though from the weight of the Persian mail they had so needlessly worn. "What did that blasphemous monster want with us? Did he hope to drive us to madness?"

"No," said Farrell wearily. "He was mocking us. Certainly he didn't withhold his cutthroats because he was afraid to try."

THE long beam of the headlights swept the château, then picked up the winding road as the car headed back toward the city. D'Artois sat hunched behind the wheel. Farrell shivered at the

memory of that ghastly loveliness that had greeted them from the grave.

"I know she was dead," reiterated Farrell. "She couldn't have been alive. Not with that dagger I saw jammed into her breast this afternoon. But why did he invite you? What everlastingly damned mummerie—there's something behind all this—she's going to greet them in the Garden and there will be no farewell—was that all illusion, or——"

Farrell slumped back against the cushions and made a gesture of bewilderment and futility.

They left the river road, passed through the Mousserole Gate, and threaded their way through the unsavory quarters between there and the Nive. As they crossed the first of the seven bridges that span the river, d'Artois suddenly jerked back from his crouch behind the wheel.

"*Nom de Dieu!*" he exclaimed.

Farrell, aroused by the note of alarm, glanced at his companion and saw that the horror on his face was in keeping with the consternation in his voice.

The car leaped forward as d'Artois stepped on the accelerator.

"Death and damnation!" he shouted above the full-throated roar of the motor. "We sat there like dummies. *That* is what he wanted!"

"What?" demanded Farrell, tense, and alarmed by d'Artois' contagious excitement. A sudden fear seized him.

"A trap. Not for your worthless head nor mine, but for her! Thaumaturgy! If there is but one greater damn fool than Glenn Farrell, it is Pierre d'Artois!"

They passed the plaza, and with a screech of brakes slowed down enough to make the turn at rue Port Neuf. Then up rue d'Espagne, around the hairpin turn, and thence down the street along the city wall. Again the brake linings smoked their wrath and squealed their protest.

Fuming and cursing in a high rage, d'Artois leaped to the curbing, dashed up the steps, and pounded Antoinette Delatour's door with the butt of his pistol.

"*Qu'est-ce qu'il y a?*" cried the terrified, bewildered maid.

"Flames and damnation! Open, quick!" demanded d'Artois. "*C'est moi!*"

"But she is sleeping," protested the maid, still half asleep.

"Hasten, then. If she sleeps, wake her—is she indeed——"

And as the door yielded, d'Artois, pistol in hand, charged up the stairs, taking them three at a time. Farrell was but a jump behind him.

They pounded on Antoinette's door. No response.

"The key——" began d'Artois.

But Farrell stepped back, gathered himself, and charged the door. It resisted the shock; but a second assault burst it open, tearing the lock from its socket.

The floor of Antoinette's room was covered with fallen plaster. Her bed was empty. A hole two feet square yawned in the ceiling. The turquoise and silver slippers mocked them.

"Gone!" muttered Farrell.

"While we sat there ready for an ambush that didn't materialize," added d'Artois.

Farrell turned to the door. D'Artois seized him by the arm.

"*Tenez!* If you are going to tear the château to pieces," he said, "spare yourself the trouble. They have taken her elsewhere. No effort was made to detain us when we left because none was necessary. And they will not be at the château, not any of them."

Farrell's eyes were cold as sword-points as they flashed back again to the empty, canopied bed. Then the slaying rage left him.

"Right, Pierre," he admitted. "It's your move. With some head-work."

"Head-work, indeed!" retorted d'Artois with a bitter, mordant laugh. "It was my headwork that led to this. We should have watched her."

5. *Ibrahim Khan*

"Now, where do we start?" demanded Farrell the following morning, as he tasted the strong coffee that was to banish the remains of the nightmarish sleep from which sunrise had awakened them. "You've got the *Sûreté*—that's what you call your detective bureau, isn't it?—on the trail. But there's a lot of this that no honest policeman could swallow."

"It is indeed a madhouse," admitted d'Artois. "But let us sum up for a moment: Antoinette is evidently *en rapport* with some one in that Garden; some one with whom she identifies herself, and whose savage beatings in some way leave marks on Antoinette's body.

"By means of clairvoyance or other unusual perception, she recognized the Marquis in her dream garden, her description of which tallies closely with the traditional paradise devised by the higher Ismailians for the deluding of their fanatical assassins.

"Assassins operating very much like the *fedawi* of five centuries ago murdered La Dorada, the sweetheart of the Marquis. La Dorada bears a marked resemblance to Antoinette, though far from enough to make her a double, except under the most favorable conditions.

"The terribly resurrected La Dorada last night spoke of a Garden. And the dying La Dorada pronounced the name Hassan just before she expired in the plaza. Through the whole chain of horror and deviltry, we see a continuous linkage of the Ismailians and the *basbeeshin* of accursed memory.

"Antoinette," continued d'Artois, "must in some way be involved in a mesh of necromancy and murder that hinges on her resemblance to La Dorada. It is not impossible that she was kidnapped to double for La Dorada in that accursed Garden."

"And finally," concluded d'Artois, "this society of thaumaturges, which has made such overgrown fools of us, is obviously allied to or even an integral part of the society of Ismailians and its higher orders, adepts, occultists, necromancers, and devil-mongers of all degrees."

"Now that you've summed it up, what are we going to do?" reiterated Farrell.

"You will take the trail at once," replied d'Artois.

Farrell brightened perceptibly at the hint of direct action.

"Shoot," he said briskly.

"*Mais non*," countered d'Artois, "it is you who will shoot if my plan is right. You are deft at disguise, and you speak several Oriental languages like a native."

D'Artois paused, intently studied the lean, bronzed features of his friend, and his cold gray eyes.

"An Arab," he muttered. "Possible, but not so good. A Kurd . . . yes, that would be better."

"Wrong!" contradicted Farrell. "There were some Kurds at the château last night, notably that hell-hound of a Shirkuh. And the first of the assassins I shot down in the plaza was a Kurd. Too many of them in the picture. I might be tripped on their dialect."

"An Afghan, then," compromised d'Artois. "They are Aryans, and our blood brothers, those Afghans. You will loiter around the waterfront. I will warn the *Sûreté* to arrest you at times, but to release you for lack of evidence; so be careful not to be too brazen in building

up a local background of feuds and slayings to substantiate your supposed reason for having left your native hills.

"It is a slim chance; but it is possible that you will stumble across some Ismailian who will favorably mark your possibilities. In the meanwhile, I will keep in touch with you as much as possible.

"But remember, one false move will betray your mission. And the first warning you will receive will be a dagger jammed very deeply into your back. You are flirting with sudden death the moment you leave this house."

THAT afternoon Farrell lurched from a doorway that the most vivid imagination could not have associated with the house of Pierre d'Artois. The shape of his eyebrows had been changed by judicious plucking. His hair had been dyed, and the cut of his mustaches altered. Tenacious, finely powdered pigments had been rubbed into his eyelids and about his eyes so as to change their expression: all trifles, yet the total effect, aided by the drunken swagger, the gestures, the reek of 'araki and foreign tobacco, was that Glenn Farrell had disappeared, and that a hard, haggard, quarrelsome Afghan sobering up from a spree strode muttering down rue Saint Augustin, and thence toward the *quai* along the Adour.

He found fishing-vessels, tramps from Algiers, and a *zaroug* that had sailed all the way from the Red Sea with its crew of stout Danakils. Husayn, its *nakhoda*, was a lean, grizzled Arab whose manner suggested pearl-poaching, smuggling, or slave-running from the Somali Coast to Arabia, with piracy thrown in for good measure. . . . Husayn spoke of his health, which forbade further traffic on the Red Sea. . . .

There was a Levantin, oily and cringing, who peddled narcotics. . . .

There were brawls along the waterfront. No true Afghan would or could abstain. A fight was a fight.

Very soon the waterfront boasted a new character, a quarrelsome Afghan, drunken, bawdy, stranded, swearing loudly by the honor of the Durani clan, and ready for any skulduggery. Ibrahim Khan, they called him.

Once in a while some whining cadger of drinks would mutter as Ibrahim Khan reviled him and tossed him a franc. That was a member of the *Sûreté* giving, and receiving, the lack of news that is falsely said to be good news. Sometimes it was warning, but never encouragement.

The quarter of the city that lies between the Nive and the Mousserole Wall is so disreputable that during the war it was out of bounds for soldiers. It is a district of narrow, dingy streets, dirty cafés, bawdy-houses of the lowest order; it abounds in cheap wine, cheaper women, and all the scum and riffraff of a polyglot border-and-seaport town.

While the upper stratum of the enemy was doubtless of high degree, the foundation layer would be in the mire. The underworld of France would furnish its quota for the lower order of assassins. The master mind needed dirty tools for dirty work; and here, among the thieves, pimps, cutthroats of beyond the river, the trail might be picked up.

Ibrahim Khan sat in one of the dingiest of those unsavory resorts, muttering in Pushtu and Arabic and broken French, alternately gross and poetic as he courted the attention of Marcelie, the barmaid whose coarse, buxom loveliness drew trade for all departments of the house.

"Tie your husband to a rope, Bimbar,
Tie the rope to a tree;
Throw the tree in the river, Bimbar,
And come to your lover."

Thus he chanted in amorous, wine-

muddled accents, the whole stanza in one breath, and, in the Afghan fashion, ending in a high-pitched, gasping cry, a full octave higher.

The girl did not understand the words; but there was one sitting in the corner who did.

"Oh, my brother," he murmured, and spat contemptuously, "are such as that sister of pigs fit for the pride of the Durani clan?"

Ibrahim Khan's hand flashed to the hilt of one of the knives that bristled in his belt. But before he could draw, the thin-faced man smiled.

"Put that knife away, brother," he said. "I have news for you."

"Well?" interrogated Ibrahim Khan a little less belligerently. "Out with it."

"Softly, softly," murmured the stranger. Ibrahim Khan had never seen him along the waterfront, or in the Mousserole quarter. "I am Nureddin. I have been interested in your handiness in certain matters . . . and Husayn, the *nakhoda*, speaks well of you——"

"He should, Allah blacken him!" admitted Ibrahim Khan, who under his layer of grime was Glenn Farrell, trembling with eagerness to follow up what he sensed was the first open move to take the bait he had so patiently and thus far vainly offered the enemy.

"There are women," continued Nureddin, "lovelier than the brides of paradise."

Farrell laughed contemptuously, and made an insulting remark that left little doubt as to his opinion of Nureddin's profession: but that was to play his part as a truculent Afghan.

"Nay, by Allah!" protested Nureddin with a good-humored laugh. "It is not what you think. Follow me, if you have courage."

Farrell scrutinized Nureddin for an instant. Whatever game Nureddin might

be playing, it would certainly not be for small counters. Then Farrell, still feigning skepticism, drew from the pocket of his grimy, ill-fitting suit a small pouch, hefted it so that the gold it contained clinked softly. He tossed the money to Marcelle.

"*Ya Nureddin, I will fight as eagerly for my naked hide as for a pouch of gold. Now if you still want me to meet your friends, I will entertain them royally, inshallah!*"

Nureddin smiled and stroked his chin.

"By Allah, O Afghan, you are suspicious. Follow me."

"Lead on," agreed Farrell.

HE FOLLOWED NUREDDIN to the street and thence to an alley so narrow that with his outstretched arms he could at the same time touch the buildings on both sides: and the narrowness was exceeded only by the stench. Nureddin halted at the end of the alley. A heavy, iron-bound door barred further progress.

"From here you must go blindfolded," said Nureddin.

"By your beard!" mocked Farrell as his hand flashed into view with a pistol whose cavernous muzzle gaped ominously. "Perhaps you would like to bind my hands also? Now, forward! Or I will blow thy teeth right and left . . . if it so please Allah," he concluded piously.

"Fire!" retorted Nureddin. "The Master would give me a less pleasant death for disobeying his orders."

In the moonlight Farrell could see the perspiration that glittered on Nureddin's forehead; but he did not flinch.

"*La, billabi!*" ejaculated Farrell after a moment. "Were there a blood feud between us, I would. But as it is——" He shrugged, holstered his pistol, and turned, to stalk down the narrow alley.

Farrell was certain, now, that he was

on the right trail. But since spies are notoriously eager to agree to anything and everything to gain admittance to forbidden doors, Farrell had to play the blustering, alternately suspicious and foolhardy Afghan. He swaggered away in his lordly fashion, presenting his back as a fair target for hurled knife, or pistol fire.

"*Ya Ibrahim!*" protested Nureddin. "Be reasonable. *He* ordered. It is on my head——"

"*He*, whoever he is," retorted Farrell, "may then seek me himself and I will induce him to change his rules. *Wallah!* And your head, that is no more than a ball to play with!"

"Oh, well, have it your own way," agreed Nureddin resignedly as Farrell again turned. Then he clapped his hands sharply.

Farrell sensed his danger; but before he could whirl and draw, something soft and clinging enveloped him. It was a net whose fine, stout silken cords bound his limbs and entangled him.

"God, by the Very God, by the One True God!" he swore, struggling with the soft, relentless thing that enmeshed him like a monstrous spider-web, and seeking to draw a knife. "Pig and father of pigs!"

Something emerged from the shadow of the pilaster that buttressed the wall. Farrell dropped flat, still striving to extricate himself and tackle his enemy. He secured a footing and leaped up, butting his shoulder with a terrific jolt into his enemy's stomach.

A grunt and a gasped curse. A warning cry from Nureddin. The knife in Farrell's hand slashed a dozen meshes in the net. Then, before he could follow up and extricate himself, a form dropped from a window directly above, driving him flat against the paving. His knife dug vainly between the cobblestones. He recovered, thrust upward. . . .

Smack! Something hard and heavy and swiftly moving swept his senses away as he felt his blade bite home

You will want to follow Farrell into Satan's Garden and share with him the utterly amazing adventures that befell there. This story will be concluded in the May WEIRD TALES



Black Thirst

By C. L. MOORE



"Men do not come here uninvited—and live."

Another weird and thrilling tale about Northwest Smith, by the author of "Shambleau"—an amazing story of ultimate horror

NORTHWEST SMITH leant his head back against the warehouse wall and stared up into the black night-sky of Venus. The waterfront street was very quiet tonight, very dangerous. He could hear no sound save the eternal slap-slap of water against the piles, but he knew how much of danger and sudden

death dwelt here voiceless in the breathing dark, and he may have been a little homesick as he stared up into the clouds that masked a green star hanging lovely on the horizon—Earth and home. And if he thought of that he must have grinned wryly to himself in the dark, for Northwest Smith had no home, and Earth

would not have welcomed him very kindly just then.

He sat quietly in the dark. Above him in the warehouse wall a faintly lighted window threw a square of pallor upon the wet street. Smith drew back into his angle of darkness under the slanting shaft, hugging one knee. And presently he heard footsteps softly on the street.

He may have been expecting footsteps, for he turned his head alertly and listened, but it was not a man's feet that came so lightly over the wooden quay, and Smith's brow furrowed. A woman, here, on this black waterfront by night? Not even the lowest class of Venusian street-walker dared come along the waterfronts of Ednes on the nights when the space-liners were not in. Yet across the pavement came clearly now the light tapping of a woman's feet.

Smith drew farther back into the shadows and waited. And presently she came, a darkness in the dark save for the triangular patch of pallor that was her face. As she passed under the light falling dimly from the window overhead he understood suddenly how she dared walk here and who she was. A long black cloak hid her, but the light fell upon her face, heart-shaped under the little three-cornered velvet cap that Venusian women wear, fell on ripples of half-hidden bronze hair; and by that sweet triangular face and shining hair he knew her for one of the Minga maids—those beauties that from the beginning of history have been bred in the Minga stronghold for loveliness and grace, as race-horses are bred on Earth, and reared from earliest infancy in the art of charming men. Scarcely a court on the three planets lacks at least one of these exquisite creatures, long-limbed, milk-white, with their bronze hair and lovely brazen faces—if the lord of that court has the wealth to buy them. Kings

● You who have read "Shambleau" in WEIRD TALES for last November will plunge into this story by the same author, knowing beforehand that a fascinating experience awaits you. Its blood-freezing glimpses of ultimate horror and the eldritch fascination of the weird black thirst of the Alendar and the incredible beauty of the Minga girls make a wholly amazing story that you can not afford to miss. The Alendar, whose every move is cloaked in mystery, is one of the weirdest and most interesting characters in all fiction.

from many nations and races have poured their riches into the Minga gateway, and girls like pure gold and ivory have gone forth to grace a thousand palaces, and this has been so since Ednes first rose on the shore of the Greater Sea.

This girl walked here unafraid and unharmed because she wore the beauty that marked her for what she was. The heavy hand of the Minga stretched out protectingly over her bronze head, and not a man along the wharf-fronts but knew what dreadful penalties would overtake him if he dared so much as to lay a finger on the milk-whiteness of a Minga maid—terrible penalties, such as men whisper of fearfully over *segir*-whisky mugs in the waterfront dives of many nations—mysterious, unnamable penalties more dreadful than any knife or gun-flash could inflict.

And these dangers, too, guarded the gates of the Minga castle. The chastity of the Minga girls was proverbial, a trade boast. This girl walked in peace and safety more sure than that attending the steps of a nun through slum streets by night on Earth.

But even so, the girls went forth very

rarely from the gates of the castle, never unattended. Smith had never seen one before, save at a distance. He shifted a little now, to catch a better glimpse as she went by, to look for the escort that must surely walk a pace or two behind, though he heard no footsteps save her own. The slight motion caught her eye. She stopped. She peered closer into the dark, and said in a voice as sweet and smooth as cream,

"How would you like to earn a gold-piece, my man?"

A flash of perversity twisted Smith's reply out of its usual slovenly dialect, and he said in his most cultured voice, in his most perfect High Venusian,

"Thank you, no."

For a moment the woman stood quite still, peering through the darkness in a vain effort to reach his face. He could see her own, a pale oval in the window light, intent, surprized. Then she flung back her cloak and the dim light glinted on the case of a pocket flash as she flicked the catch. A beam of white radiance fell blindingly upon his face.

For an instant the light held him—lounging against the wall in his space-man's leather, the burns upon it, the tatters, ray-gun in its holster low on his thigh, and the brown scarred face turned to hers, eyes the colorless color of pale steel narrowed to the glare. It was a typical face. It belonged here, on the waterfront, in these dark and dangerous streets. It belonged to the type that frequents such places, those lawless men who ride the spaceways and live by the rule of the ray-gun, recklessly, warily outside the Patrol's jurisdiction. But there was more than that in the scarred brown face turned to the light. She must have seen it as she held the flash unwavering, some deep-buried trace of breeding and birth that made the cultured accents of the

High Venusian not incongruous. And the colorless eyes derided her.

"No," she said, flicking off the light. "Not one gold-piece, but a hundred. And for another task than I meant."

"Thank you," said Smith, not rising. "You must excuse me."

"Five hundred," she said without a flicker of emotion in her creamy voice.

In the dark Smith's brows knit. There was something fantastic in the situation. Why——?

She must have sensed his reaction almost as he realized it himself, for she said,

"Yes, I know. It sounds insane. You see—I knew you in the light just now. Will you?—can you?—I can't explain here on the street. . . ."

SMITH held the silence unbroken for thirty seconds, while a lightning debate flashed through the recesses of his wary mind. Then he grinned to himself in the dark and said,

"I'll come." Belatedly he got to his feet. "Where?"

"The Palace Road on the edge of the Minga. Third door from the central gate, to the left. Say to the door-warden—'Vaudir'."

"That is——?"

"Yes, my name. You will come, in half an hour?"

An instant longer Smith's mind hovered on the verge of refusal. Then he shrugged.

"Yes."

"At the third bell, then." She made the little Venusian gesture of parting and wrapped her cloak about her. The blackness of it, and the softness of her footfalls, made her seem to melt into the darkness without a sound, but Smith's trained ears heard her footsteps very soft-

ly on the pavement as she went on into the dark.

He sat there until he could no longer detect any faintest sound of feet on the wharf. He waited patiently, but his mind was a little dizzy with surprize. Was the traditional inviolability of the Minga a fraud? Were the close-guarded girls actually allowed sometimes to walk unattended by night, making assignations as they pleased? Or was it some elaborate hoax? Tradition for countless centuries had declared the gates in the Minga wall to be guarded so relentlessly by strange dangers that not even a mouse could slip through without the knowledge of the Alendar, the Minga's lord. Was it then by order of the Alendar that the door would open to him when he whispered "Vaudir" to the warden? Or would it open? Was the girl perhaps the property of some Endes lord, deceiving him for obscure purposes of her own? He shook his head a little and grinned to himself. After all, time would tell.

He waited a while longer in the dark. Little waves lapped the piles with sucking sounds, and once the sky lit up with the long, blinding roar of a space-ship splitting the dark.

At last he rose and stretched his long body as if he had been sitting there for a good while. Then he settled the gun on his leg and set off down the black street. He walked very lightly in his spaceman's boots.

A twenty-minute walk through dark byways, still and deserted, brought him to the outskirts of that vast city-within-a-city called the Minga. The dark, rough walls of it towered over him, green with the lichen-like growths of the Hot Planet. On the Palace Road one deeply-sunk central gateway opened upon the mysteries within. A tiny blue light burned over the arch. Smith went softly through the dim-

ness to the left of it, counting two tiny doors half hidden in deep recesses. At the third he paused. It was painted a rusty green, and a green vine spilling down the wall half veiled it, so that if he had not been searching he would have passed it by.

Smith stood for a long minute, motionless, staring at the green panels deep-sunk in rock. He listened. He even sniffed the heavy air. Warily as a wild beast he hesitated in the dark. But at last he lifted his hand and tapped very lightly with his fingertips on the green door.

It swung open without a sound. Pitchblackness confronted him, an archway of blank dark in the dimly seen stone wall. And a voice queried softly, "*Qu'alo'val?*"

"Vaudir," murmured Smith, and grinned to himself involuntarily. How many romantic youths must have stood at these doors in nights gone by, breathing hopefully the names of bronze beauties to doormen in dark archways! But unless tradition lied, no man before had ever passed. He must be the first in many years to stand here invited at a little doorway in the Minga wall and hear the watchman murmur, "Come."

Smith loosened the gun at his side and bent his tall head under the arch. He stepped into blackness that closed about him like water as the door swung shut. He stood there with quickened heart-beats, hand on his gun, listening. A blue light, dim and ghostly, flooded the place without warning and he saw that the doorman had crossed to a switch at the far side of the tiny chamber wherein he stood. The man was one of the Minga eunuchs, a flabby creature, splendid in crimson velvet. He carried a cloak of purple over his arm, and made a splash of royal colors in the dimness. His side-long eyes regarded Smith from under lifted brows, with a look that the Earthman could not fathom. There was amuse-

ment in it, and a touch of terror and a certain reluctant admiration.

Smith looked about him in frank curiosity. The little entry was apparently hollowed out of the enormously thick wall itself. The only thing that broke its bareness was the ornate bronze door set in the far wall. His eyes sought the eunuch's in mute inquiry.

The creature came forward obsequiously, murmuring, "Permit me—" and flung the purple cloak he carried over Smith's shoulders. Its luxurious folds, faintly fragrant, swept about him like a caress. It covered him, tall as he was, to the very boot-soles. He drew back in faint distaste as the eunuch lifted his hands to fasten the jeweled clasp at his throat. "Please to draw up the hood also," murmured the creature without apparent resentment, as Smith snapped the fastening himself. The hood covered his sun-bleached hair and fell in thick folds about his face, casting it into deep shadow.

THE eunuch opened the bronze inner door and Smith stared down a long hallway curving almost imperceptibly to the right. The paradox of elaborately decorated simplicity was illustrated in every broad polished panel of the wall, so intricately and exquisitely carved that it gave at first the impression of a strange, rich plainness.

His booted feet sank sensuously into the deep pile of the carpet at every step as he followed the eunuch down the hall. Twice he heard voices murmuring behind lighted doors, and his hand lay on the butt of the ray-gun under the folds of his robe, but no door opened and the hall lay empty and dim before them. So far it had been amazingly easy. Either tradition lied about the impregnability of the Minga, or the girl Vaudir had bribed with incredible lavishness or—that thought

again, uneasily—it was with the Alendar's consent that he walked here unchallenged. But why?

They came to a door of silver grille at the end of the curved corridor, and passed through it into another hallway slanting up, as exquisitely voluptuous as the first. A flight of stairs wrought from dully gleaming bronze curved at the end of it. Then came another hall lighted with rosy lanterns that swung from the arched ceiling, and beyond another stairway, this time of silvery metal fretwork, spiraling down again.

And in all that distance they met no living creature. Voices hummed behind closed doors, and once or twice strains of music drifted faintly to Smith's ears, but either the corridors had been cleared by a special order, or incredible luck was attending them. And he had the uncomfortable sensation of eyes upon his back more than once. They passed dark hallways and open, unlighted doors, and sometimes the hair on his neck bristled with the feeling of human nearness, inimical, watching.

For all of twenty minutes they walked through curved corridors and up and down spiral stairs until even Smith's keen senses were confused and he could not have said at what height above the ground he was, or in what direction the corridor led into which they at last emerged. At the end of that time his nerves were tense as steel wire and he restrained himself only by force from nervous, over-the-shoulder glances each time they passed an open door. An air of languorous menace brooded almost visibly over the place, he thought. The sound of soft voices behind doors, the feel of eyes, of whispers in the air, the memory of tales half heard in waterfront dives about the secrets of the Minga, the nameless dangers of the Minga. . . .

Smith gripped his gun as he walked through the splendor and the dimness, every sense assailed by voluptuous appeals, but his nerves strained to wire and his flesh crawled as he passed unlighted doors. This was too easy. For so many centuries the tradition of the Minga had been upheld, a byword of impregnability, a stronghold guarded by more than swords, by greater dangers than the ray-gun—and yet here he walked, unquestioned, into the deepest heart of the place, his only disguise a velvet cloak, his only weapon a holstered gun, and no one challenged him, no guards, no slaves, not even a passer-by to note that a man taller than any dweller here should be strode unquestioned through the innermost corridors of the inviolable Minga. He loosened the ray-gun in its sheath.

The eunuch in his scarlet velvet went on confidently ahead. Only once did he falter. They had reached a dark passageway, and just as they came opposite its mouth the sound of a soft, slithering scrape, as of something over stones, draggily, reached their ears. He saw the eunuch start and half glance back, and then hurry on at a quicker pace, nor did he slacken until they had put two gates and a length of lighted corridor between them and that dark passage.

So they went on, through halls half lighted, through scented air and empty dimness where the doorways closed upon mumurous mysteries within or opened to dark and the feel of watching eyes. And they came at last, after endless, winding progress, into a hallway low-ceiled and paneled in mother-of-pearl, pierced and filigreed with carving, and all the doors were of silver grille. And as the eunuch pushed open the silver gate that led into this corridor the thing happened that his taut nerves had been expecting ever since the start of the fantastic journey. One

of the doors opened and a figure stepped out and faced them.

Under the robe Smith's gun slid soundlessly from its holster. He thought he saw the eunuch's back stiffen a little, and his step falter, but only for an instant. It was a girl who had come out, a slave-girl in a single white garment, and at the first glimpse of the tall, purple-robed figure with hooded face, towering over her, she gave a little gasp and slumped to her knees as if under a blow. It was obeisance, but so shocked and terrified that it might have been a faint. She laid her face to the very carpet, and Smith, looking down in amazement on the prostrate figure, saw that she was trembling violently.

The gun slid back into its sheath and he paused for a moment over her shuddering homage. The eunuch twisted round to beckon with soundless violence, and Smith caught a glimpse of his face for the first time since their journey began. It was glistening with sweat, and the sidelong eyes were bright and shifting, like a hunted animal's. Smith was oddly reassured by the sight of the eunuch's obvious panic. There was danger then—danger of discovery, the sort of peril he knew and could fight. It was that creeping sensation of eyes watching, of unseen things slithering down dark passages, that had strained his nerves so painfully. And yet, even so, it had been too easy. . . .

THE eunuch had paused at a silver door half-way down the hall and was murmuring something very softly, his mouth against the grille. A panel of green brocade was stretched across the silver door on the inside, so they could see nothing within the room, but after a moment a voice said, "Good!" in a breathing whisper, and the door quivered

a little and swung open six inches. The eunuch genuflected in a swirl of scarlet robes, and Smith caught his eye swiftly, the look of terror not yet faded, but amusement there too, and a certain respect. And then the door opened wider and he stepped inside.

He stepped into a room green as a sea-cave. The walls were paneled in green brocade, low green couches circled the room, and, in the center, the blazing bronze beauty of the girl Vaudir. She wore a robe of green velvet cut in the startling Venusian fashion to loop over one shoulder and swathe her body in tight, molten folds, and the skirt of it was slit up one side so that at every other motion the long white leg flashed bare.

He saw her for the first time in a full light, and she was lovely beyond belief with her bronze hair cloudy on her shoulders and the pale, lazy face smiling. Under deep lashes the sidelong black eyes of her race met his.

He jerked impatiently at the hampering hood of the cloak. "May I take this off?" he said. "Are we safe here?"

She laughed with a short, metallic sound. "Safe!" she said ironically. "But take it off if you must. I've gone too far now to stop at trifles."

And as the rich folds parted and slid away from his leather brownness she in turn stared in quickened interest at what she had seen only in a half-light before. He was almost laughably incongruous in this jewel-box room, all leather and sunburn and his scarred face keen and wary in the light of the lantern swinging from its silver chain. She looked a second time at that face, its lean, leathery keenness and the scars that ray-guns had left, and the mark of knife and talon, and the tracks of wild years along the spaceways. Wariness and resolution were instinct in

that face, there was ruthlessness in every line of it, and when she met his eyes a little shock went over her. Pale, pale as bare steel, colorless in the sunburnt face. Steady and clear and no-colored, expressionless as water. Killer's eyes.

And she knew that this was the man she needed. The name and fame of Northwest Smith had penetrated even into these mother-of-pearl Minga halls. In its way it had spread into stranger places than this, by strange and devious paths and for strange, devious reasons. But even had she never heard the name (nor the deed she connected it with, which does not matter here), she would have known from this scarred face, these cold and steady eyes, that here stood the man she wanted, the man who could help her if any man alive could.

And with that thought, others akin to it flashed through her mind like blades crossing, and she dropped her milk-white lids over the sword-play to hide its deadliness, and said, "Northwest . . . Smith," in a musing murmur.

"To be commanded," said Smith in the idiom of her own tongue, but a spark of derision burned behind the courtly words.

Still she said nothing, but looked him up and down with slow eyes. He said at last,

"Your desire——?" and shifted impatiently.

"I had need of a wharfman's services," she said, still in that breathing whisper. "I had not seen you, then. . . . There are many wharfmen along the seafront, but only one of you, oh man of Earth——" and she lifted her arms and swayed toward him exactly as a reed sways to a lake breeze, and her arms lay lightly on his shoulders and her mouth was very near. . . .

S MITH looked down into the veiled eyes. He knew enough of the breed of Venus to guess the deadly sword-flash of motive behind anything a Venusian does, and he had caught a glimpse of that particular sword-flash before she lowered her lids. And if her thoughts were sword-play, his burnt like heat-beams straight to their purpose. In the winking of an eye he knew a part of her motive—the most obvious part. And he stood there unanswering in the circle of her arms.

She looked up at him, half incredulous not to feel a leather embrace tighten about her.

"*Qu'a lo'val?*" she murmured whimsically. "So cold, then, Earthman? Am I not desirable?"

Wordlessly he looked down at her, and despite himself the blood quickened in him. Minga girls for too many centuries had been born and bred to the art of charming men for Northwest Smith to stand here in the warm arms of one and feel no answer to the invitation in her eyes. A subtle fragrance rose from her brazen hair, and the velvet molded a body whose whiteness he could guess from the flash of the long bare thigh her slashed skirt showed. He grinned a little crookedly and stepped away, breaking the clasp of her hands behind his neck.

"No," he said. "You know your art well, my dear, but your motive does not flatter me."

She stood back and regarded him with a wry, half-appreciative smile.

"What do you mean?"

"I'll have to know much more about all this before I commit myself as far as—that."

"You fool," she smiled. "You're in over your head now, as deeply as you could ever be. You were the moment

you crossed the door-sill at the outer wall. There is no drawing back."

"Yet it was so easy—so very easy, to come in," murmured Smith.

She came forward a step and looked up at him with narrowed eyes, the pretense of seduction dropped like a cloak.

"You saw that, too?" she queried in a half-whisper. "It seemed so—to you? Great Shar, if I could be *sure*. . . ." And there was terror in her face.

"Suppose we sit down and you tell me about it," suggested Smith practically.

She laid a hand—white as cream, soft as satin—on his arm and drew him to the low divan that circled the room. There was inbred, generations-old coquetry in the touch, but the white hand shook a little.

"What is it you fear so?" queried Smith curiously as they sank to the green velvet. "Death comes only once, you know."

She shook her bronze head contemptuously.

"Not that," she said. "At least—no, I wish I knew just what it is I do fear—and that is the most dreadful part of it. But I wish—I wish it had not been so easy to get you here."

"The place was deserted," he said thoughtfully. "Not a soul along the halls. Not a guard anywhere. Only once did we see any other creature, and that was a slave-girl in the hall just outside your door."

"What did she—do?" Vaudir's voice was breathless.

"Dropped to her knees as if she'd been shot. You might have thought me the devil himself by the way she acted."

The girl's breath escaped in a sigh.

"Safe, then," she said thankfully. "She must have thought you the—the Alendar." Her voice faltered a little over the name, as if she half feared to

pronounce it. "He wears a cloak like that you wore when he comes through the halls. But he comes so very seldom. . . ."

"I've never seen him," said Smith, "but, good Lord, is he such a monster? The girl dropped as if she'd been hamstrung."

"Oh, hush, hush!" Vaudir agonized. "You mustn't speak of him so. He's—he's—of course she knelt and hid her face. I wish to heaven I had. . . ."

Smith faced her squarely and searched the veiled dark eyes with a gaze as bleak as empty seas. And he saw very clearly behind the veils the stark, nameless terror at their depths.

"What is it?" he demanded.

SHE drew her shoulders together and shivered a little, and her eyes were furtive as she glanced around the room.

"Don't you feel it?" she asked in that half-whisper to which her voice sank so caressingly. And he smiled to himself to see how instinctively eloquent was the courtesan in her—alluring gestures though her hands trembled, soft voice huskily seductive even in its terror. "—always, always!" she was saying. "The soft, hushed, hovering menace! It haunts the whole place. Didn't you feel it as you came in?"

"I think I did," Smith answered slowly. "Yes—that feel of something just out of sight, hiding in dark doorways . . . a sort of tensity in the air. . . ."

"Danger," she whispered, "terrible, nameless danger . . . oh, I feel it wherever I go . . . it's soaked into me and through me until it's a part of me, body and soul. . . ."

Smith heard the note of rising hysteria in her voice, and said quickly,

"Why did you come to me?"

"I didn't, consciously." She conquered the hysteria with an effort and took up

her tale a little more calmly. "I was really looking for a wharfman, as I said, and for quite another reason than this. It doesn't matter, now. But when you spoke, when I flashed my light and saw your face, I knew you. I'd heard of you, you see, and about the—the Lakkmada affair, and I knew in a moment that if anyone alive could help me, it would be you."

"But what is it? Help you in what?"

"It's a long story," she said, "and too strange, almost, to believe, and too vague for you to take seriously. And yet I know. . . . Have you heard the history of the Minga?"

"A little of it. It goes back very far."

"Back into the beginning—and farther. I wonder if you can understand. You see, we on Venus are closer to our beginnings than you. Life here developed faster, of course, and along lines more different than Earthmen realize. On Earth civilization rose slowly enough for the—the elementals—to sink back into darkness. On Venus—oh, it's bad, bad for men to develop too swiftly! Life rises out of dark and mystery and things too strange and terrible to be looked upon. Earth's civilization grew slowly, and by the time men were civilized enough to look back they were sufficiently far from their origins not to see, not to know. But we here who look back see too clearly, sometimes, too nearly and vividly the black beginning. . . . Great Shar defend me, what I have seen!"

White hands flashed up to hide sudden terror in her eyes, and hair in a brazen cloud fell fragrantly over her fingers. And even in that terror was an inbred allure as natural as breathing.

In the little silence that followed, Smith caught himself glancing furtively over his shoulder. The room was ominously still. . . .

Vaudir lifted her face from her hands, shaking back her hair. The hands trembled. She clasped them on her velvet knee and went on.

"The Minga," she said, and her voice was resolutely steady, "began too long ago for anyone to name the date. It began before dates. When Far-thursa came out of the sea-fog with his men and founded this city at the mountain's foot he built it around the walls of a castle already here. The Minga castle. And the Alendar sold Minga girls to the sailors and the city began. All that is myth, but the Minga had always been here."

"The Alendar dwelt in his stronghold and bred his golden girls and trained them in the arts of charming men, and guarded them with—with strange weapons—and sold them to kings at royal prices. There has always been an Alendar. I have seen him, once. . . .

"He walks the halls on rare occasions, and it is best to kneel and hide one's face when he comes by. Yes, it is best. . . . But I passed him one day, and—and—he is tall, tall as you, Earthman, and his eyes are like—the space between the worlds. I looked into his eyes under the hood he wore—I was not afraid of devil or man, then. I looked him in the eyes before I made obeisance, and I—I shall never be free of fear again. I looked into evil as one looks into a pool. Blackness and blankness and raw evil. Impersonal, not malevolent. Elemental . . . the elemental dreadfulness that life rose from. And I know very surely, now, that the first Alendar sprang from no mortal seed. There were races before man. . . . Life goes back very dreadfully through many forms and evils, before it reaches the well-spring of its beginning. And the Alendar had not the eyes of a human creature, and I met them—and I am damned!"

W. T.—3

Her voice trailed softly away and she sat quiet for a space, staring before her with remembering eyes.

"I am doomed and damned to a blacker hell than any of Shar's priests threaten," she resumed. "No, wait—this is not hysteria. I haven't told you the worst part. You'll find it hard to believe, but it's truth—truth—Great Shar, if I could hope it were not!"

"The origin of it is lost in legend. But why, in the beginning, did the first Alendar dwell in the misty sea-edge castle, alone and unknown, breeding his bronze girls?—not for sale, then. Where did he get the secret of producing the invariable type? And the castle, legend says, was age-old when Far-thursa found it. The girls had a perfected, consistent beauty that could be attained only by generations of effort. How long had the Minga been built, and by whom? Above all, why? What possible reason could there be for dwelling there absolutely unknown, breeding civilized beauties in a world half-savage? Sometimes I think I have guessed the reason. . . ."

HER voice faded into a resonant silence, and for a while she sat staring blindly at the brocaded wall. When she spoke again it was with a startling shift of topic.

"Am I beautiful, do you think?"

"More so than any I have ever seen before," answered Smith without flattery.

Her mouth twisted.

"There are girls here now, in this building, so much lovelier than I that I am humbled to think of them. No mortal man has ever seen them, except the Alendar, and he—is not wholly mortal. No mortal man will ever see them. They are not for sale. Eventually they will disappear. . . .

"One might think that feminine beauty

must reach an apex beyond which it can not rise, but this is not true. It can increase and intensify until—I have no words. And I truly believe that there is no limit to the heights it can reach, in the hands of the Alendar. And for every beauty we know and hear of, through the slaves that tend them, gossip says there are as many more, too immortally lovely for mortal eyes to see. Have you ever considered that beauty might be refined and intensified until one could scarcely bear to look upon it? We have tales here of such beauty, hidden in some of the secret rooms of the Minga.

"But the world never knows of these mysteries. No monarch on any planet known is rich enough to buy the loveliness hidden in the Minga's innermost rooms. It is not for sale. For countless centuries the Alendars of the Minga have been breeding beauty, in higher and higher degrees, at infinite labor and cost—beauty to be locked in secret chambers, guarded most terribly, so that not even a whisper of it passes the outer walls, beauty that vanishes, suddenly, in a breath—like that! Where? Why? How? No one knows.

"And it is that I fear. I have not a fraction of the beauty I speak of, yet a fate like that is written for me—somehow I know. I have looked into the eyes of the Alendar, and—I know. And I am sure that I must look again into those blank black eyes, more deeply, more dreadfully. . . . I know—and I am sick with terror of what more I shall know, soon. . . .

"Something dreadful is waiting for me, drawing nearer and nearer. Tomorrow, or the next day, or a little while after, I shall vanish, and the girls will wonder and whisper a little, and then forget. It has happened before. Great Shar, what shall I do?"

She wailed it, musically and hopelessly, and sank into a little silence. And then her look changed and she said reluctantly,

"And I have dragged you in with me. I have broken every tradition of the Minga in bringing you here, and there has been no hindrance—it has been too easy, too easy. I think I have sealed your death. When you first came I was minded to trick you into committing yourself so deeply that perforce you must do as I asked to win free again. But I know now that through the simple act of asking you here I have dragged you in deeper than I dreamed. It is a knowledge that has come to me somehow, out of the air tonight. I can feel knowledge beating upon me—compelling me. For in my terror to get help I think I have precipitated damnation upon us both. I know now—I have known in my soul since you entered so easily, that you will not go out alive—that—it will come for me and drag you down too. . . . Shar, Shar, what have I done!"

"But what, what?" Smith struck his knee impatiently. "What is it we face? Poison? Guards? Traps? Hypnotism? Can't you give me even a guess at what will happen?"

He leaned forward to search her face commandingly, and saw her brows knit in an effort to find words that would cloak the mysteries she had to tell. Her lips parted irresolutely.

"The Guardians," she said. "The—Guardians. . . ."

And then over her hesitant face swept a look of such horror that his hand clenched on his knee and he felt the hairs rise along his neck. It was not horror of any material thing, but an inner dreadfulness, a terrible awareness. The eyes that had met his glazed and escaped his commanding stare without shifting their

focus. It was as if they ceased to be eyes and became dark windows—vacant. The beauty of her face set like a mask, and behind the blank windows, behind the lovely set mask, he could sense dimly the dark command flowing in. . . .

She put out her hands stiffly and rose. Smith found himself on his feet, gun in hand, while his hackles lifted shudderingly and sometimes pulsed in the air as tangibly as the beat of wings. Three times that nameless shudder stirred the air, and then Vaudir stepped forward like an automaton and faced the door. She walked in her dream of masked dreadfulness, stiffly, through the portal. As she passed him he put out a hesitant hand and laid it on her arm, and a little stab of pain shot through him at the contact, and once more he thought he felt the pulse of wings in the air. Then she passed by without hesitation, and his hand fell.

He made no further effort to arouse her, but followed after on cat-feet, delicately as if he walked on eggs. He was crouching a little, unconsciously, and his gun-hand held a tense finger on the trigger.

They went down the corridor in a breathing silence, an empty corridor where no lights showed beyond closed doors, where no murmur of voices broke the live stillness. But little shudders seemed to shake in the air somehow, and his heart was pounding suffocatingly.

Vaudir walked like a mechanical doll, tense in a dream of horror. When they reached the end of the hall he saw that the silver grille stood open, and they passed through without pausing. But Smith noted with a little qualm that a gateway opening to the right was closed and locked, and the bars across it were sunk firmly into wall-sockets. There was no choice but to follow her.

THE corridor slanted downward. They passed others branching to right and left, but the silver gateways were closed and barred across each. A coil of silver stairs ended the passage, and the girl went stiffly down without touching the rails. It was a long spiral, past many floors, and as they descended, the rich, dim light lessened and darkened and a subtle smell of moisture and salt invaded the scented air. At each turn where the stairs opened on successive floors, gates were barred across the outlets; and they passed so many of these that Smith knew, as they went down and down, that however high the green jewel-box room had been, by now they were descending deep into the earth. And still the stair wound downward. The stories that opened beyond the bars like honeycomb layers became darker and less luxurious, and at last ceased altogether and the silver steps wound down through a well of rock, lighted so dimly at wide intervals that he could scarcely see the black polished walls circling them in. Drops of moisture began to appear on the dark surface, and the smell was of black salt seas and dank underground.

And just as he was beginning to believe that the stairs went on and on into the very black, salt heart of the planet, they came abruptly to the bottom. A flourish of slim, shining rails ended the stairs, at the head of a hallway, and the girl's feet turned unhesitatingly to follow its dark length. Smith's pale eyes, searching the dimness, found no trace of other life than themselves; yet eyes were upon him—he knew it surely.

They came down the black corridor to a gateway of wrought metal set in bars whose ends sank deep into the stone walls. She went through, Smith at her heels raking the dark with swift, unresting eyes like a wild animal's, wary in a

strange jungle. And beyond the great gates a door hung with sweeping curtains of black ended the hall. Somehow Smith felt that they had reached their destination. And nowhere along the whole journey had he had any choice but to follow Vaudir's unerring, unseeing footsteps. Grilles had been locked across every possible outlet. But he had his gun. . . .

Her hands were white against the velvet as she pushed aside the folds. Very bright she stood for an instant—all green and gold and white—against the blackness. Then she passed through and the folds swept to behind her—candle-flame extinguished in dark velvet. Smith hesitated the barest instant before he parted the curtains and peered within.

He was looking into a room hung in black velvet that absorbed the light almost hungrily. That light radiated from a single lamp swinging from the ceiling directly over an ebony table. It shone softly on a man—a very tall man.

He stood darkly under it, very dark in the room's darkness, his head bent, staring up from under level black brows. His eyes in the half-hidden face were pits of blackness, and under the lowered brows two pinpoint gleams stabbed straight—not at the girl—but at Smith hidden behind the curtains. It held his eyes as a magnet holds steel. He felt the narrow glitter, plunging blade-like into his very brain, and from the keen, burning stab something within him shuddered away involuntarily. He thrust his gun through the curtains, stepped through quietly, and stood meeting the sword-gaze with pale, unwavering eyes.

Vaudir moved forward with a mechanical stiffness that somehow could not hide her grace—it was as if no power existing could ever evoke from that lovely body less than loveliness. She came

to the man's feet and stopped there. Then a long shudder swept her from head to foot and she dropped to her knees and laid her forehead to the floor.

Across the golden loveliness of her the man's eyes met Smith's, and the man's voice, deep, deep, like black waters flowing smoothly, said,

"I am the Alendar."

"Then you know me," said Smith, his voice harsh as iron in the velvet dimness.

"You are Northwest Smith," said the smooth, deep voice dispassionately. "An outlaw from the planet Earth. You have broken your last law, Northwest Smith. Men do not come here uninvited—and live. You perhaps have heard tales. . . ."

His voice melted into silence, lingeringly.

Smith's mouth curled into a wolfish grin, without mirth, and his gun hand swung up. Murder flashed bleakly from his steel-pale eyes. And then with stunning abruptness the world dissolved about him. A burst of coruscations flamed through his head, danced and wheeled and drew slowly together in a whirling darkness until they were two pinpoint sparks of light—a dagger stare under level brows. . . .

WHEN the room steadied about him he was standing with slack arms, the gun hanging from his fingers, an apathetic numbness slowly withdrawing from his body. A dark smile curved smoothly on the Alendar's mouth.

The stabbing gaze slid casually away, leaving him dizzy in sudden vertigo, and touched the girl prostrate on the floor. Against the black carpet her burnished bronze curls sprayed out exquisitely. The green robe folded softly back from the roundness of her body, and nothing in the universe could have been so lovely as the creamy whiteness of her on the dark

floor. The pit-black eyes brooded over her impassively. And then, in his smooth, deep voice the Alendar asked, amazingly, matter-of-factly,

"Tell me, do you have such girls on Earth?"

Smith shook his head to clear it. When he managed an answer his voice had steadied, and in the receding of that dizziness even the sudden drop into casual conversation seemed not unreasonable.

"I have never seen such a girl anywhere," he said calmly.

The sword gaze flashed up and pierced him.

"She has told you," said the Alendar. "You know I have beauties here that outshine her as the sun does a candle. And yet . . . she has more than beauty, this Vaudir. You have felt it, perhaps?"

Smith met the questioning gaze, searching for mockery, but finding none. Not understanding—a moment before the man had threatened his life—he took up the conversation.

"They all have more than beauty. For what other reason do kings buy the Minga girls?"

"No—not that charm. She has it too, but something more subtle than fascination, much more desirable than loveliness. She has courage, this girl. She has intelligence. Where she got it I do not understand. I do not breed my girls for such things. But I looked into her eyes once, in the hallway, as she told you—and saw there more arousing things than beauty. I summoned her—and you come at her heels. Do you know why? Do you know why you did not die at the outer gate or anywhere along the hallways on your way in?"

Smith's pale stare met the dark one questioningly. The voice flowed on.

"Because there are—interesting things in your eyes too. Courage and ruthlessness and a certain—power, I think. Intensity is in you. And I believe I can find a use for it, Earthman."

Smith's eyes narrowed a little. So calm, so matter-of fact, this talk. But death was coming. He felt it in the air—he knew that feel of old. Death—and worse things than that, perhaps. He remembered the whispers he had heard.

On the floor the girl moaned a little, and stirred. The Alendar's quiet, pinpoint eyes flicked her, and he said softly, "Rise." And she rose, stumbling, and stood before him with bent head. The stiffness was gone from her. On an impulse Smith said suddenly, "Vaudir!" She lifted her face and met his gaze, and a thrill of horror rippled over him. She had regained consciousness, but she would never be the same frightened girl he had known. Black knowledge looked out of her eyes, and her face was a strained mask that covered horror barely—barely! It was the face of one who has walked through a blacker hell than any of humanity's understanding, and gained knowledge there that no human soul could endure knowing and live.

She looked him full in the face for a long moment, silently, and then turned away to the Alendar again. And Smith thought, just before her eyes left his, he had seen in them one wild flash of hopeless, desperate appeal. . . .

"Come," said the Alendar.

He turned his back—Smith's gun-hand trembled up and then fell again. No, better wait. There was always a bare hope, until he saw death closing in all around.

He stepped out over the yielding carpet at the Alendar's heels. The girl came after with slow steps and eyes downcast in a horrible parody of meditation, as if

she brooded over the knowledge that dwelt so terribly behind her eyes.

The dark archway at the opposite end of the room swallowed them up. Light failed for an instant—a breath-stopping instant while Smith's gun leaped up involuntarily, like a live thing in his hand, futilely against invisible evil, and his brain rocked at the utter blackness that enfolded him. It was over in the wink of an eye, and he wondered if it had ever been as his gun-hand fell again. But the Alendar said across one shoulder,

"A barrier I have placed to guard my—beauties. A mental barrier that would have been impassable had you not been with me, yet which—but you understand now, do you not, my Vaudir?" And there was an indescribable leer in the query that injected a note of monstrous humanity into the inhuman voice.

"I understand," echoed the girl in a voice as lovely and toneless as a sustained musical note. And the sound of those two inhuman voices proceeding from the human lips of his companions sent a shudder thrilling along Smith's nerves.

They went down the long corridor thereafter in silence, Smith treading soundlessly in his spaceman's boots, every fiber of him tense to painfulness. He found himself wondering, even in the midst of his strained watchfulness, if any other creature with a living human soul had ever gone down this corridor before—if frightened golden girls had followed the Alendar thus into blackness, or if they too had been drained of humanity and steeped in that nameless horror before their feet followed their master through the black barrier.

The hallway led downward, and the salt smell became clearer and the light sank to a glimmer in the air, and in a silence that was not human they went on.

Presently the Alendar said—and his

deep, liquid voice did nothing to break the stillness, blending with it softly so that not even an echo roused,

"I am taking you into a place where no other man than the Alendar has ever set foot before. It pleases me to wonder just how your unaccustomed senses will react to the things you are about to see. I am reaching an—an age"—he laughed softly—"where experiment interests me. Look!"

SMITH's eyes blinked shut before an intolerable blaze of sudden light. In the streaked darkness of that instant while the glare flamed through his lids he thought he felt everything shift unaccountably about him, as if the very structure of the atoms that built the walls were altered. When he opened his eyes he stood at the head of a long gallery blazing with a soft, delicious brilliance. How he had got there he made no effort even to guess.

Very beautifully it stretched before him. The walls and floor and ceiling were of sheeny stone. There were low couches along the walls at intervals, and a blue pool broke the floor, and the air sparkled unaccountably with golden light. And figures were moving through that champagne sparkle. . . .

Smith stood very still, looking down the gallery. The Alendar watched him with a subtle anticipation upon his face, the pinpoint glitter of his eyes sharp enough to pierce the Earthman's very brain. Vaudir with bent head brooded over the black knowledge behind her drooping lids. Only Smith of the three looked down the gallery and saw what moved through the golden glimmer of the air.

They were girls. They might have been goddesses—angels haloed with bronze curls, moving leisurely through a

golden heaven where the air sparkled like wine. There must have been a score of them strolling up and down the gallery in twos and threes, lolling on the couches, bathing in the pool. They wore the infinitely graceful Venusian robe with its looped shoulder and slit skirt, in soft, muted shades of violet and blue and jewel-green, and the beauty of them was breath-stopping as a blow. Music was in every gesture they made, a flowing, singing grace that made the heart ache with its sheer loveliness.

He had thought Vaudir lovely, but here was beauty so exquisite that it verged on pain. Their sweet, light voices were pitched to send little velvety burrs along his nerves, and from a distance the soft sounds blended so musically that they might have been singing together. The loveliness of their motion made his heart contract suddenly, and the blood pounded in his ears. . . .

"You find them beautiful?" The Alendar's voice blended into the humming lilt of voices as perfectly as it had blended with silence. His dagger-glitter of eyes was fixed piercingly on Smith's pale gaze, and he smiled a little, faintly. "Beautiful? Wait!"

He moved down the gallery, tall and very dark in the rainbow light. Smith, following after, walked in a haze of wonder. It is not given to every man to walk through heaven. He felt the air tingle like wine, and a delicious perfume caressed him and the haloed girls drew back with wide, amazed eyes fixed on him in his stained leather and heavy boots as he passed. Vaudir paced quietly after, her head bent, and from her the girls turned away their eyes, shuddering a little.

He saw now that their faces were as lovely as their bodies, languorously, colorfully. They were contented faces, un-

conscious of beauty, unconscious of any other existence than their own—soulless. He felt that instinctively. Here was beauty incarnate, physically, tangibly; but he had seen in Vaudir's face—before—a sparkle of daring, a tenderness of remorse at having brought him here, that gave her an indefinable superiority over even this incredible beauty, soulless.

They went down the gallery in a sudden hush as the musical voices fell silent from very amazement. Apparently the Alendar was a familiar figure here, for they scarcely glanced at him, and from Vaudir they turned away in a shuddering revulsion that preferred not to recognize her existence. But Smith was the first man other than the Alendar whom they had ever seen, and the surprize of it struck them dumb.

They went on through the dancing air, and the last lovely, staring girls fell behind, and an ivory gateway opened before them, without a touch. They went downstairs from there, and along another hallway, while the tingle died in the air and a hum of musical voices sprang up behind them. They passed beyond the sound. The hallway darkened until they were moving again through dimness.

PRESENTLY the Alendar paused and turned.

"My more costly jewels," he said, "I keep in separate settings. As here——"

He stretched out his arm, and Smith saw that a curtain hung against the wall. There were others, farther on, dark blots against the dimness. The Alendar drew back black folds, and light from beyond flowed softly through a pattern of bars to cast flowery shadows on the opposite wall. Smith stepped forward and stared.

He was looking through a grille window down into a room lined with dark velvet. It was quite plain. There was a

low couch against the wall opposite the window, and on it—Smith's heart gave a stagger and paused—a woman lay. And if the girls in the gallery had been like goddesses, this woman was lovelier than men have ever dared to imagine even in legends. She was beyond divinity—long limbs white against the velvet, sweet curves and planes of her rounding under the robe, bronze hair spilling like lava over one white shoulder, and her face calm as death with closed eyes. It was a passive beauty, like alabaster shaped perfectly. And charm, a fascination all but tangible, reached out from her like a magic spell. A sleeping charm, magnetic, powerful. He could not wrench his eyes away. He was like a wasp caught in honey. . . .

The Alendar said something across Smith's shoulder, in a vibrant voice that thrilled the air. The closed lids rose. Life and loveliness flowed into the calm face like a tide, lighting it unbearably. That heady charm wakened and brightened to a dangerous liveness—tugging, pulling. . . . She rose in one long glide like a wave over rocks; she smiled (Smith's senses reeled to the beauty of that smile) and then sank in a deep salaam, slowly, to the velvet floor, her hair rippling and falling all about her, until she lay abased in a blaze of loveliness under the window.

The Alendar let the curtain fall, and turned to Smith as the dazzling sight was blotted out. Again the pinpoint glitter stabbed into Smith's brain. The Alendar smiled again.

"Come," he said, and moved down the hall.

They passed three curtains, and paused at a fourth. Afterward Smith remembered that the curtain must have been drawn back and he must have bent forward to stare through the window bars,

but the sight he saw blasted every memory of it from his mind. The girl who dwelt in this velvet-lined room was stretching on tiptoe just as the drawn curtain caught her, and the beauty and grace of her from head to foot stopped Smith's breath as a ray-stab to the heart would have done. And the irresistible, wrenching charm of her drew him forward until he was clasping the bars with white-knuckled hands, unaware of anything but her compelling, soul-destroying desirability. . . .

She moved, and the dazzle of grace that ran like a song through every motion made his senses ache with its pure, unattainable loveliness. He knew, even in his daze of rapture, that he might hold the sweet, curved body in his arms forever, yet hunger still for the fulfilment which the flesh could never wring from her. Her loveliness aroused a hunger in the soul more maddening than the body's hunger could ever be. His brain rocked with the desire to possess that intangible, irresistible loveliness that he knew he could never possess, never reach with any sense that was in him. That bodiless desire raged like madness through him, so violently that the room reeled and the white outlines of the beauty unattainable as the stars wavered before him. He caught his breath and choked and drew back from the intolerable, exquisite sight.

The Alendar laughed and dropped the curtain.

"Come," he said again, the subtle amusement clear in his voice, and Smith in a daze moved after him down the hall.

They went a long way, past curtains hanging at regular intervals along the wall. When they paused at last, the curtain before which they stopped was faintly luminous about the edges, as if something dazzling dwelt within. The Alendar drew back the folds.

"We are approaching," he said, "a pure clarity of beauty, hampered only a little by the bonds of flesh. Look."

One glance only Smith snatched of the dweller within. And the exquisite shock of that sight went thrilling like torture through every nerve of him. For a mad instant his reason staggered before the terrible fascination beating out from that dweller in waves that wrenched at his very soul — incarnate loveliness tugging with strong fingers at every sense and every nerve and intangibly, irresistibly, at deeper things than these, groping among the roots of his being, dragging his soul out. . . .

Only one glance he took, and in the glance he felt his soul answer that dragging, and the terrible desire tore futilely through him. Then he flung up an arm to shield his eyes and reeled back into the dark, and a wordless sob rose to his lips and the darkness reeled about him.

The curtain fell. Smith pressed the wall and breathed in long, shuddering gasps, while his heart-beats slowed gradually and the unholy fascination ebbed from about him. The Alendar's eyes were glittering with a green fire as he turned from the window, and a nameless hunger lay shadowily on his face. He said,

"I might show you others, Earthman. But it could only drive you mad, in the end—you were very near the brink for a moment just now—and I have another use for you. . . . I wonder if you begin to understand, now, the purpose of all this?"

THE green glow was fading from that dagger-sharp gaze as the Alendar's eyes stabbed into Smith's. The Earthman gave his head a little shake to clear away the vestiges of that devouring desire, and took a fresh grip on the butt of his gun.

The familiar smoothness of it brought him a measure of reassurance, and with it a reawakening to the peril all around. He knew now that there could be no conceivable mercy for him, to whom the innermost secrets of the Minga had been unaccountably revealed. Death was waiting—strange death, as soon as the Alendar wearied of talking—but if he kept his ears open and his eyes alert it might not—please God—catch him so quickly that he died alone. One sweep of that blade-blue flame was all he asked, now. His eyes, keen and hostile, met the dagger-gaze squarely. The Alendar smiled and said,

"Death in your eyes, Earthman. Nothing in your mind but murder. Can that brain of yours comprehend nothing but battle? Is there no curiosity there? Have you no wonder of why I brought you here? Death awaits you, yes. But a not unpleasant death, and it awaits all, in one form or another. Listen, let me tell you—I have reason for desiring to break through that animal shell of self-defense that seals in your mind. Let me look deeper—if there are depths. Your death will be—useful, and in a way, pleasant. Otherwise—well, the black beasts hunger. And flesh must feed them, as a sweeter drink feeds me. . . . Listen."

Smith's eyes narrowed. A sweeter drink. . . . Danger, danger—the smell of it in the air—instinctively he felt the peril of opening his mind to the plunging gaze of the Alendar, the force of those compelling eyes beating like strong lights into his brain. . . .

"Come," said the Alendar softly, and moved off soundlessly through the gloom. They followed, Smith painfully alert, the girl walking with lowered, brooding eyes, her mind and soul afar in some wallowing darkness whose shadow showed so hideously beneath her lashes.

The hallway widened to an arch, and abruptly, on the other side, one wall dropped away into infinity and they stood on the dizzy brink of a gallery opening on a black, heaving sea. Smith bit back a startled oath. One moment before the way had led through low-roofed tunnels deep underground; the next instant they stood on the shore of a vast body of rolling darkness, a tiny wind touching their faces with the breath of unnamable things.

Very far below, the dark waters rolled. Phosphorescence lighted them uncertainly, and he was not even sure it was water that surged there in the dark. A heavy thickness seemed to be inherent in the rollers, like black slime surging.

The Alendar looked out over the fire-tinted waves. He waited for an instant without speaking, and then, far out in the slimy surges, something broke the surface with an oily splash, something mercifully veiled in the dark, then dived again, leaving a wake of spreading ripples over the surface.

"Listen," said the Alendar, without turning his head. "Life is very old. There are older races than man. Mine is one. Life rose out of the black slime of the sea-bottoms and grew toward the light along many diverging lines. Some reached maturity and deep wisdom when man was still swinging through the jungle trees.

"For many centuries, as mankind counts time, the Alendar has dwelt here, breeding beauty. In later years he has sold some of his lesser beauties, perhaps to explain to mankind's satisfaction what it could never understand were it told the truth. Do you begin to see? My race is very remotely akin to those races which suck blood from man, less remotely to those which drink his life-forces for nourishment. I am more refined even

than that. I drink—beauty. I live on beauty. Yes, literally.

"Beauty is as tangible as blood, in a way. It is a separate, distinct force that inhabits the bodies of men and women. You must have noticed the vacuity that accompanies perfect beauty in so many women . . . the force so strong that it drives out all other forces and lives vampirishly at the expense of intelligence and goodness and conscience and all else.

"In the beginning, here—for our race was old when this world began, spawned on another planet, and wise and ancient—we woke from slumber in the slime, to feed on the beauty force inherent in mankind even in cave-dwelling days. But it was meager fare, and we studied the race to determine where the greatest prospects lay, then selected specimens for breeding, built this stronghold and settled down to the business of evolving mankind up to its limit of loveliness. In time we weeded out all but the present type. For the race of man we have developed the ultimate type of loveliness. It is interesting to see what we have accomplished on other worlds, with utterly different races. . . .

"Well, there you have it. Women, bred as a spawning-ground for the devouring force of beauty on which we live.

"But—the fare grows monotonous, as all food must without change. Vaudir I took because I saw in her a sparkle of something that except in very rare instances has been bred out of the Minga girls. For beauty, as I have said, eats up all other qualities but beauty. Yet somehow intelligence and courage survived latently in Vaudir. It decreases her beauty, but the tang of it should be a change from the eternal sameness of the rest. And so I thought until I saw you.

"I realized then how long it had been

since I tasted the beauty of man. It is so rare, so different from female beauty, that I had all but forgotten it existed. And you have it, very subtly, in a raw, harsh way. . . .

"I have told you all this to test the quality of that—that harsh beauty in you. Had I been wrong about the deeps of your mind, you would have gone to feed the black beasts, but I see that I was not wrong. Behind your animal shell of self-preservation are depths of that force and strength which nourish the roots of male beauty. I think I shall give you a while to let it grow, under the forcing methods I know, before I—drink. It will be delightful. . . ."

THE voice trailed away in a murmurous silence, the pinpoint glitter sought Smith's eyes. And he tried half-heartedly to avoid it, but his eyes turned involuntarily to the stabbing gaze, and the alerteness died out of him, gradually, and the compelling pull of those glittering points in the pits of darkness held him very still.

And as he stared into the diamond glitter he saw its brilliance slowly melt and darken, until the pinpoints of light had changed to pools that dimmed, and he was looking into black evil as elemental and vast as the space between the worlds, a dizzying blankness wherein dwelt unnamable horror . . . deep, deep . . . all about him the darkness was clouding. And thoughts that were not his own seeped into his mind out of that vast, elemental dark . . . crawling, writhing thoughts . . . until he had a glimpse of that dark place where Vaudir's soul swallowed, and something sucked him down and down into a waking nightmare he could not fight. . . .

Then somehow the pull broke for an instant. For just that instant he stood

again on the shore of the heaving sea and gripped a gun with nerveless fingers—then the darkness closed about him again, but a different, uneasy dark that had not quite the all-compelling power of that other nightmare—it left him strength enough to fight.

And he fought, a desperate, moveless, soundless struggle in a black sea of horror, while worm-thoughts coiled through his straining mind and the clouds rolled and broke and rolled again about him. Sometimes, in the instants when the pull slackened, he had time to feel a third force struggling here between that black, blind downward suck that dragged at him and his own sick, frantic effort to fight clear, a third force that was weakening the black drag so that he had moments of lucidity when he stood free on the brink of the ocean and felt the sweat roll down his face and was aware of his laboring heart and how gaspingly breath tortured his lungs, and he knew he was fighting with every atom of himself, body and mind and soul, against the intangible blackness sucking him down.

And then he felt the force against him gather itself in a final effort—he sensed desperation in that effort—and come rolling over him like a tide. Bowled over, blinded and dumb and deaf, drowning in utter blackness, he floundered in the deeps of that nameless hell where thoughts that were alien and slimy squirmed through his brain. Bodiless he was, and unstable, and as he swallowed there in the ooze more hideous than any earthly ooze, because it came from black, inhuman souls and out of ages before man, he became aware that the worm-thoughts a-squirm in his brain were forming slowly into monstrous meanings—knowledge like a formless flow was pouring through his bodiless brain, knowledge so dreadful that consciously he

could not comprehend it, though subconsciously every atom of his mind and soul sickened and writhed futilely away. It was flooding over him, drenching him, permeating him through and through with the very essence of dreadfulness—he felt his mind melting away under the solvent power of it, melting and running fluidly into new channels and fresh molds—horrible molds. . . .

And just at that instant, while madness folded around him and his mind rocked on the verge of annihilation, something snapped, and like a curtain the dark rolled away, and he stood sick and dizzy on the gallery above the black sea. Everything was reeling about him, but they were stable things that shimmered and steadied before his eyes, blessed black rock and tangible surges that had form and body—his feet pressed firmness and his mind shook itself and was clean and his own again.

And then through the haze of weakness that still shrouded him a voice was shrieking wildly, "Kill! . . . kill!" and he saw the Alendar staggering against the rail, all his outlines unaccountably blurred and uncertain, and behind him Vaudir with blazing eyes and face wrenched hideously into life again, screaming "Kill!" in a voice scarcely human.

Like an independent creature his gun-hand leaped up—he had gripped that gun through everything that happened—and he was dimly aware of the hardness of it kicking back against his hand with the recoil, and of the blue flash flaming from its muzzle. It struck the Alendar's dark figure full, and there was a hiss and a dazzle. . . .

Smith closed his eyes tight and opened them again, and stared with a sick incredulity; for unless that struggle had unhinged his brain after all, and the

worm-thoughts still dwelt slimly in his mind, tingeing all he saw with unearthly horror—unless this was true, he was looking not at a man just rayed through the lungs, and who should be dropping now in a bleeding, collapsed heap to the floor, but at—at—God, what *was* it? The dark figure had slumped against the rail, and instead of blood gushing, a hideous, nameless, formless black poured sluggishly forth—a slime like the heaving sea below. The whole dark figure of the man was melting, slumping farther down into the pool of blackness forming at his feet on the stone floor.

Smith gripped his gun and watched in numb incredulity, and the whole body sank slowly down and melted and lost all form—hideously, gruesomely—until where the Alendar had stood a heap of slime lay viscidly on the gallery floor, hideously alive, heaving and rippling and striving to lift itself into a semblance of humanity again. And as he watched, it lost even that form, and the edges melted revoltingly and the mass flattened and slid down into a pool of utter horror, and he became aware that it was pouring slowly through the rails into the sea. He stood watching while the whole rolling, shimmering mound melted and thinned and trickled through the bars, until the floor was clear again, and not even a stain marred the stone.

A PAINFUL constriction of his lungs aroused him, and he realized he had been holding his breath, scarcely daring to realize. Vaudir had collapsed against the wall, and he saw her knees give limply, and staggered forward on uncertain feet to catch her as she fell.

"Vaudir, Vaudir!" he shook her gently. "Vaudir, what's happened? Am I dreaming? Are we safe now? Are you—awake again?"

Very slowly her white lids lifted, and the black eyes met his. And he saw shadowily there the knowledge of that wallowing void he had dimly known, the shadow that could never be cleared away. She was steeped and foul with it. And the look of her eyes was such that involuntarily he released her and stepped away. She staggered a little and then regained her balance and regarded him from under bent brows. The level inhumanity of her gaze struck into his soul, and yet he thought he saw a spark of the girl she had been, dwelling in torture amid the blackness. He knew he was right when she said, in a far-away, toneless voice,

"Awake? . . . No, not ever now, Earthman. I have been down too deeply into hell . . . he had dealt me a worse torture than he knew, for there is just enough humanity left within me to realize what I have become, and to suffer. . . .

"Yes, he is gone, back into the slime that bred him. I have been a part of him, one with him in the blackness of his soul, and I know. I have spent eons since the blackness came upon me, dwelt for eternities in the dark, rolling seas of his mind, sucking in knowledge . . . and as I was one with him, and he now gone, so shall I die; yet I will see you safely out of here if it is in my power, for it was I who dragged you in. If I can remember—if I can find the way. . . ."

She turned uncertainly and staggered a step back along the way they had come. Smith sprang forward and slid his free arm about her, but she shuddered away from the contact.

"No, no—unbearable—the touch of clean human flesh—and it breaks the chord of my remembering. . . . I can not look back into his mind as it was when I dwelt there, and I must, I must. . . ."

She shook him off and reeled on, and he cast one last look at the billowing sea, and then followed. She staggered along the stone floor on stumbling feet, one hand to the wall to support herself, and her voice was whispering gustily, so that he had to follow close to hear, and then almost wished he had not heard,

"——black slime—darkness feeding on light—everything wavers so—slime, slime and a rolling sea—he rose out of it, you know, before civilization began here—he is age-old—there never has been but one Alendar. . . . And somehow—I could not see just how, or remember why—he rose from the rest, as some of his race on other planets had done, and took the man-form and stocked his breeding-pens. . . ."

They went on up the dark hallway, past curtains hiding incarnate loveliness, and the girl's stumbling footsteps kept time to her stumbling, half-incoherent words.

"——has lived all these ages here, breeding and devouring beauty—vampire-thirst, a hideous delight in drinking in that beauty-force—I felt it and remembered it when I was one with him—wrapping black layers of primal slime about—quenching human loveliness in ooze, sucking—blind black thirst. . . . And his wisdom was ancient and dreadful and full of power—so he could draw a soul out through the eyes and sink it in hell, and drown it there, as he would have done mine if I had not had, somehow, a difference from the rest. Great Shar, I wish I had not! I wish I were drowned in it and did not feel in every atom of me the horrible uncleanness of —what I know. But by virtue of that hidden strength I did not surrender wholly, and when he had turned his power to subduing you I was able to struggle, there in the very heart of his mind, making a disturbance that shook him as he fought

us both—making it possible to free you long enough for you to destroy the human flesh he was clothed in—so that he lapsed into the ooze again. I do not quite understand why that happened—only that his weakness, with you assaulting him from without and me struggling strongly in the very center of his soul, was such that he was forced to draw on the power he had built up to maintain himself in the man form, and weakened it enough so that he collapsed when the man-form was assailed. And he fell back into the slime again—whence he rose—black slime—heaving—oozing. . . ."

Her voice trailed away in murmurs, and she stumbled, all but falling. When she regained her balance she went on ahead of him at a greater distance, as if his very nearness were repugnant to her, and the soft babble of her voice drifted back in broken phrases without meaning.

Presently the air began to tingle again, and they passed the silver gate and entered that gallery where the air sparkled like champagne. The blue pool lay jewel-clear in its golden setting. Of the girls there was no sign.

WHEN they reached the head of the gallery the girl paused, turning to him a face twisted with the effort at memory.

"Here is the trial," she said urgently. "If I can remember—" She seized her head in clutching hands, shaking it savagely. "I haven't the strength, now—can't—can't—" the piteous little murmur reached his ears incoherently. Then she straightened resolutely, swaying a little, and faced him, holding out her hands. He clasped them hesitantly, and saw a shiver go through her at the contact, and her face contort painfully, and then a shudder communicated itself

through that clasp and he too winced in revolt. He saw her eyes go blank and her face strain in lines of tensity, and a fine dew broke out on her forehead. For a long moment she stood so, her face like death, and strong shudders went over her body and her eyes were blank as the void between the planets.

And as each shudder swept her it went unbroken through the clasping of their hands to him, and they were black waves of dreadfulness, and again he saw the heaving sea and wallowed in the hell he had fought out of on the gallery, and he knew for the first time what torture she must be enduring who dwelt in the very depths of that uneasy dark. The pulses came faster, and for moments together he went down into the blind blackness and the slime, and felt the first wriggling of the worm-thoughts tickling the roots of his brain. . . .

And then suddenly a clean darkness closed round them and again everything shifted unaccountably, as if the atoms of the gallery were changing, and when Smith opened his eyes he was standing once more in the dark, slanting corridor with the smell of salt and antiquity heavy in the air.

Vaudir moaned softly beside him, and he turned to see her reeling against the wall and trembling so from head to foot that he looked to see her fall the next moment.

"Better—in a moment," she gasped. "It took—nearly all my strength to—to get us through—wait. . . ."

So they halted there in the darkness and the dead salt air, until the trembling abated a little and she said, "Come," in her little whimpering voice. And again the journey began. It was only a short way, now, to the barrier of black blankness that guarded the door into the room where they had first seen the Alendar.

When they reached the place she shivered a little and paused, then resolutely held out her hands. And as he took them he felt once more the hideous slimy waves course through him, and plunged again into the heaving hell. And as before the clean darkness flashed over them in a breath, and then she dropped his hands and they were standing in the archway looking into the velvet-hung room they had left—it seemed eons ago.

He watched as waves of blinding weakness flooded over her from that supreme effort. Death was visible in her face as she turned to him at last.

"Come—oh, come quickly," she whispered, and staggered forward.

At her heels he followed, across the room, past the great iron gateway, down the hall to the foot of the silver stairs. And here his heart sank, for he felt sure she could never climb the long spiral distances to the top. But she set her foot on the step and went upward resolutely, and as he followed he heard her murmuring to herself,

"Wait—oh, wait—let me reach the end—let me undo this much—and then—no, no! Please Shar, not the black slime again. . . . Earthman, Earthman!"

She paused on the stair and turned to face him, and her haggard face was frantic with desperation and despair.

"Earthman, promise—do not let me die like this! When we reach the end, ray me! Burn me clean, or I shall go down for eternity into the black sinks from which I dragged you free. Oh, promise!"

"I will," Smith's voice said quietly. "I will."

And they went on. Endlessly the stairs spiraled upward and endlessly they climbed. Smith's legs began to ache intolerably, and his heart was pounding like a wild thing, but Vaudir seemed not to

notice weariness. She climbed steadily and no more unsurely than she had come along the halls. And after eternities they reached the top.

And there the girl fell. She dropped like a dead woman at the head of the silver spiral. Smith thought for a sick instant that he had failed her and let her die uncleansed, but in a moment or two she stirred and lifted her head and very slowly dragged herself to her feet.

"I will go on—I will, I will," she whispered to herself. "—come this far—must finish—" and she reeled off down the lovely, rosily-lit hallway paned in pearl.

He could see how perilously near she was to her strength's end, and he marveled at the tenacity with which she clung to life though it ebbed away with every breath and the pulse of darkness flowed in after it. So with bulldog stubbornness she made her wavering way past door after door of carven shell, under rosy lights that flushed her face with a ghastly mockery of health, until they reached the silver gateway at the end. The lock had been removed from it by now, and the bar drawn.

She tugged open the gate and stumbled through.

And the nightmare journey went on. It must be very near morning, Smith thought, for the halls were deserted, but did he not sense a breath of danger in the still air? . . .

The girl's gasping voice answered that half-formed query as if, like the Alendar, she held the secret of reading men's minds.

"The—Guardians—still rove the halls, and unleashed now—so keep your ray-gun ready, Earthman. . . ."

After that he kept his eyes alert as they retraced, stumbling and slow, the steps he had taken on his way in. And

once he heard distinctly the soft slither of—something—scraping over the marble pavement, and twice he smelt with shocking suddenness in this scented air a whiff of salt, and his mind flashed back to a rolling black sea. . . . But nothing molested them.

STEP by faltering step the hallways fell behind them, and he began to recognize landmarks, and the girl's footsteps staggered and hesitated and went on gallantly, incredibly, beating back oblivion, fighting the dark surges rolling over her, clinging with tenacious fingers to the tiny spark of life that drove her on.

And at long last, after what seemed hours of desperate effort, they reached the blue-lit hallway at whose end the outer door opened. Vaudir's progress down it was a series of dizzy staggers, interspersed with pauses while she hung to the carven doors with tense fingers and drove her teeth into a bloodless lip and gripped that last flicker of life. He saw the shudders sweep over her, and knew what waves of washing dark must be rising all about her, and how the worm-thoughts writhed through her brain. . . . But she went on. Every step now was a little tripping, as if she fell from one foot to the other, and at each step he expected that knee to give way and pitch her down into the black deeps that yawned for her. But she went on.

She reached the bronze door, and with a last spurt of effort she lifted the bar and swung it open. Then that tiny spark flickered out like a lamp. Smith caught one flash of the rock room within—and something horrible on the floor—before he saw her pitch forward as the rising tide of slimy oblivion closed at last over her head. She was dying as she fell, and he whipped the ray-gun up and felt the recoil against his palm as a blue blaze

flashed forth and transfixed her in mid-air. And he could have sworn her eyes lighted for a flickering instant and the gallant girl he had known looked forth, cleansed and whole, before death—clean death—glazed them.

She slumped down in a huddle at his feet, and he felt a sting of tears beneath his eyelids as he looked down on her, a huddle of white and bronze on the rug. And as he watched, a film of defilement veiled the shining whiteness of her—decay set in before his eyes and progressed with horrible swiftness, and in less time than it takes to tell he was staring with horrified eyes at a pool of black slime across which green velvet lay bedraggled.

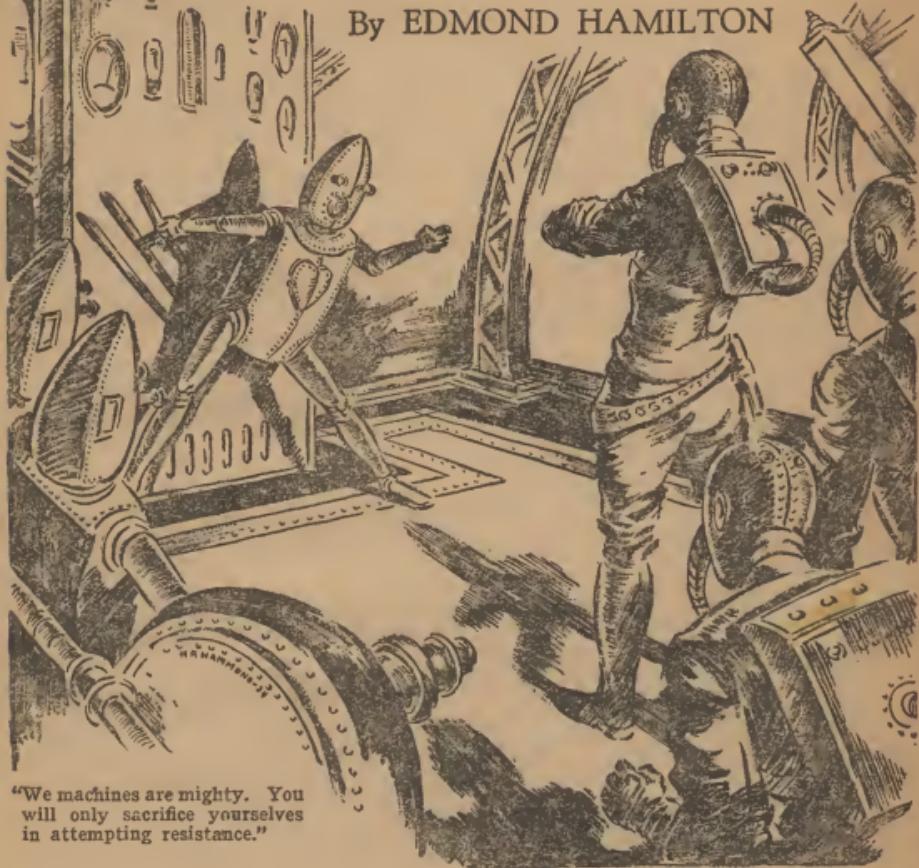
Northwest Smith closed his pale eyes, and for a moment struggled with memory, striving to wrest from it the long-forgotten words of a prayer learned a score of years ago on another planet. Then he stepped over the pitiful, horrible heap on the carpet and went on.

In the little rock room of the outer wall he saw what he had glimpsed when Vaudir opened the door. Retribution had overtaken the eunuch. The body must have been his, for tatters of scarlet velvet lay about the floor, but there was no way to recognize what its original form had been. Smith's ray-gun had blasted the eunuch through the partly opened door as he flashed the death-ray on Vaudir. The smell of salt was heavy in the air, and a trail of black slime snaked across the floor toward the wall. The wall was solid, but it ended there. . . .

Smith laid his hand on the outer door, drew the bar, swung it open. He stepped out under the hanging vines and filled his lungs with pure air, free, clear, untainted with scent or salt. A pearly dawn was breaking over Ednes.

Corsairs of the Cosmos

By EDMOND HAMILTON



"We machines are mighty. You will only sacrifice yourselves in attempting resistance."

A stupendous story of the Interstellar Patrol—an amazing weird-scientific tale of an invasion from outside the universe

WHAT was the greatest adventure that you ever took part in during your service in the Interstellar Patrol?"

That is a question which I, Dur Nal, captain in the Patrol, and my two officers are often asked.

My own answer is: "I believe our space-fight with the serpent-people was the wildest adventure ever we had."

W. T.—4

Korus Kan, my first officer, disagrees: "It was the time that we were drawn into the dark nebula."

And Jhul Din, my big second officer, differs with both of us and says, "That time we penetrated inside a comet was by far the most venturesous."

To settle this difference of opinion I once put the question to Lacq Larus, Chief of the Interstellar Patrol.

Lacq Larus knew of every venture we of the service had ever engaged upon. He considered for a long time before he answered me.

"Dur Nal," he told me finally, "I think that the time we fought the cosmic corsairs was the wildest any of us ever saw."

And looking back, I am not sure but that Lacq Larus is right. For certainly that was the maddest space-struggle in which even the oldest veterans of the Patrol ever took part.

My cruiser had just returned to headquarters at Canopus when the thing first burst upon us. Our ship had been engaged for long weeks patrolling a lonely section of the galaxy beyond Mira, policing space between the suns and seeing that law was maintained in the interstellar void.

We had been glad enough when our relief came and we could return to headquarters. At full speed we flew across the galaxy between suns and nebulae until at last we were watching Canopus' worlds come out of the huge white sun's glare as our cruiser swept in toward them.

But our stay at headquarters was to be short. For when I went up into the great tower that holds the central authority of the Interstellar Patrol, and reported our return to Lacq Larus, the Chief, I found that a new assignment awaited us.

"Dur Nal, I'm sorry to send you right back out into space," Lacq Larus told me, "but there's a job to be done."

"What is it, sir?" I asked. "A little meteor-sweeping to be done?"

"No, the space-routes of the galaxy are all clear at the moment," the Chief answered. "But I've just had a report from the astronomers at Betelgeuse that a number of celestial bodies are approaching our galaxy from outer space. They report that there are about twenty of these

bodies, that they are non-luminous and are apparently a group of dark stars. They are approaching with phenomenal speed and will reach our galaxy at a point near Betelgeuse."

"And you want us to go out and investigate these oncoming dark stars?" I guessed as he paused.

Lacq Larus nodded. "Yes. I want you to take a squadron of cruisers and go out into outer space to meet them. You will ascertain the exact course and speed of these dark stars and determine accurately where and when they will enter our galaxy. Then return here at once with your report."

I saluted. "Very well, sir. If the cruisers are ready we'll start at once."

"The squadron is waiting for you now down in the docks," Lacq Larus said. And he called after me as I went out, "I'll see that you get the leave due you when you return."

I WENT down to the great docks beside the tower, in which were resting or refitting hundreds of ships of the Interstellar Patrol. Most numerous among them were the long, cigar-shaped cruisers, the swiftest ships in space, grim beam-tubes projecting from their sides.

There were also slower, broader-beamed meteor-sweeps; observation ships fitted with elaborate instruments; heat-cruisers such as are used for close work with nebulae and suns; and representatives of all the other classes of ships in the Patrol.

I found the squadron of twenty-five cruisers assigned me, waiting with all officers and crews aboard. Then I went on to my own cruiser and as I neared the dock where it rested I saw beside it a small crowd of Patrol officers listening to some one discoursing in a loud voice. As I drew nearer I saw that the speaker

was a big, bulky figure and recognized him as Jhul Din, my second officer.

Beside him, listening in some amusement, was Korus Kan, my first officer, and the other officers were hanging on his words.

"——and we ran our ship at full speed right through that meteor-swarm!" Jhul Din was saying. "We went so fast that not a cursed meteor in the whole swarm ever touched us."

"But weren't you afraid to head your cruiser into a meteor-swarm like that?" asked a young officer.

Jhul Din stared at him. "Afraid? You won't know what it is to be afraid when you've spent as much time out in space as I have."

"Well, you're going to spend a little more time in space right now," I broke in. "Jhul Din, call the crew to stations at once."

He looked at me in dismay. "You don't mean that we're going out on patrol again, Dur Nal? Not when we've just come in?"

"We're going out again, but not on patrol," I told him, and informed them briefly of the mission Lacq Larus had assigned to us.

"Why did the Chief have to pick on us?" Jhul Din exclaimed. "Look how long it'll take us to go outside the galaxy far enough to meet those dark stars."

"Well, it can't be helped," I said as we entered the cruiser. "The sooner you quit complaining and we get started, the sooner we'll be back."

He left us, still grumbling, and I heard his deep voice calling the crew to their posts as Korus Kan and I climbed to the cruiser's bridge-room.

"Is everything in order for a start?" I asked Korus Kan and he saluted.

"Everything in order—all generators and projectors satisfactory, air-tanks and

supply-rooms full, all beam-tubes working."

"Very well," I said, and picked up the space-phone by which I could communicate with the other cruisers of my squadron.

"Dur Nal speaking—we will start in five minutes," I ordered. "Triangle formation, and keep at two light-speeds until we clear Canopus."

As the captains of the other cruisers responded their understanding, I turned to the pilot who had just come up into the bridge-room. "Start in four minutes, Jan Allon," I ordered. "Lay our course for Betelgeuse for the present."

I heard Jhul Din bellow an order down below and the space-doors clanged shut. Then the whining hum of the great generators in the lower deck began.

Jan Allon waited for a few moments, then threw on the power and pulled the cruiser's wheel slightly toward him. Our ship arroded up at once into the sunlight, the other cruisers following close behind in the familiar triangle formation of the Patrol.

In a short time our squadron was clear of Canopus, and with the huge sun glaring behind us like a great white eye we were racing across the galaxy's spaces at many light-speeds toward Betelgeuse. We followed the straightest possible course, and this took us past the Orion nebula, which lies almost directly on the space-route between Canopus and Betelgeuse. The nebula bulked for billions of miles in space beside us, a stupendous burning cloud along whose edge our comparatively tiny cruiser crawled.

ONCE the mighty nebula was behind us, it was not long before our squadron reached Betelgeuse and the galaxy's edge. There was no need for us to halt at Betelgeuse; so we passed that

sun and in a short time were passing clear out of the galaxy into outer space.

Behind us lay the galaxy, a colossal swarm of suns floating in the infinitude of space. Before us lay only space itself, vast, lightless, empty. Far, far across its unthinkable reaches glowed a few little patches of soft, hazy light, galaxies as large as our own but so far away they were hardly visible.

Out in space some distance from our galaxy we could descry with our instruments a group of dark bodies coming toward us. They were the score of dark stars approaching the galaxy from the outer emptiness. Our squadron headed right out into the infinite toward them.

Korus Kan took observations on the dark stars as we approached them, while Jhul Din and I watched.

He found that they were all of large size and that they were coming on with astounding speed.

"They're moving faster than any dark star I ever heard of before!" Korus Kan told us.

"That's all the better," Jhul Din grunted. "We'll meet them the sooner and can get back sooner into the galaxy."

We watched as the black globes of the oncoming dark stars became dimly visible in the blackness ahead. Then I gave an order for the squadron to slacken speed.

"When we meet the dark stars we'll turn and move above them and with them, back toward the galaxy," I directed, "long enough to investigate them."

In a short time the dark stars had grown to huge black worlds booming toward us close ahead.

We ascended to a higher level and prepared to turn and follow above them when they reached us. They came on with truly amazing velocity, those mighty

burned-out cinders that long ago had been suns.

From what far region of space had they come, I wondered? How came these dark wanderers to be rushing through outer space far from whatever galaxy had been their origin? What chance had led them through infinity toward our own galaxy?

Musing on this, I watched as our squadron passed close over the group, executed a broad turn, and then came back and flew above the dark stars toward the galaxy.

Now we were almost stupefied to find that they were moving through space nearly half as fast as our swift ships could move!

"By all the suns, this is incredible!" I cried. "These dark stars are moving faster than any celestial body was ever known to move!"

Korus Kan's eyes were excited. "There's something strange about this whole business! Wait and I'll take some observations."

As he trained his instruments on the hurtling worlds below, Jhul Din and I stared down at them in increasing amazement.

"Maybe there has been a cosmic convulsion in some other galaxy that hurled these dead suns into outer space," Jhul Din suggested.

"Even that wouldn't account for their tremendous velocity," I was saying, when Korus Kan interrupted.

"By the suns, it's as I suspected!" he cried. "Those dark stars are propelled by artificial power!"

We turned our stare on him. "What are you saying?"

"It's the truth!" Korus Kan affirmed. "Our instruments show that they are being impelled through space by super-powerful propulsion vibrations like those

that impel our ships! It means that the dark stars have been fitted with huge generators and projectors and controls, and are being driven through space like so many colossal ships!"

"It can't be!" Jhul Din exclaimed incredulously. "Whoever heard of dead suns the size of those being propelled artificially?"

But rapidly I was thinking. "I believe that Korus Kan is right," I said. "And if these dark stars are really being propelled deliberately through space, it means that there are living creatures of some kind on them directing their flight."

"Why have they steered their twenty worlds across the outer void toward our galaxy? Where have they come from and for what?" Jhul Din asked.

"We must learn the answer to these questions and report to headquarters. This matter may be of import to our whole galaxy."

"Shall we descend and land on one of those dark stars to investigate, then?" asked Jhul Din.

Quickly I considered. "There's no need to imperil our whole squadron," I said.

I grasped the space-phone and spoke to the other ships. "It appears that these twenty dark stars are being deliberately propelled toward our galaxy, no doubt by beings of some sort upon them," I stated. "Our cruiser is going to descend to investigate. All others of the squadron will remain at their present level, and if we do not rejoin you within two hours you will return at full speed toward the galaxy and report what has happened at headquarters."

From the captains of the other cruisers came assent to the order, and then I turned to the pilot. "Very well, Jan Al-lon—descend toward the foremost of the dark stars."

IN TENSE silence Korus Kan and Jhul Din and I watched as our cruiser shot down through space toward the first of the onrushing dead suns. What would we find there? We waited in taut anticipation as the ship dropped down through the millions of miles.

Presently Korus Kan spoke. "None of the dark stars seems to have any atmospheric halo," he said.

"What kind of creatures could exist on worlds without atmosphere?" Jhul Din marvelled.

The foremost dark star's surface rushed up toward us. We saw on it crowded movement, a stir of hosts of moving things.

"There's life of some kind down there, all right," said Jhul Din.

Then as our ship raced lower an exclamation of utter astonishment came from me. "Life? This isn't a world of life as we know it. It's a world of machines!"

For the moving things that existed in hosts on the dark star were all machines!

The twilight surface of the star was crowded with their numbers. There were towering machines that stalked to and fro; many-limbed mechanisms such as I had never seen; and dozens of other kinds.

The eye could not count them, so great were their numbers. There was no other life or moving things in sight. Here was mystery of the cosmos, dark, enigmatic. How came the active and apparently masterless machines to be peopling these dirigible worlds?

"By the suns, there must be people of some kind here!" exclaimed Jhul Din. "If not, who made these machines?"

Korus Kan uttered a sharp cry. "Dur Nal! Some of the machines are coming up toward us!"

A hundred or more mechanisms had

risen from the dark star and were flying swiftly up through space toward us.

These mechanisms had no occupants, no operators. They were simply masterless machines flying in space, disk-like in shape and with tubes much like beam-tubes projecting from them.'

"They may be going to attack us," Jhul Din warned. "Shall we beam them?"

"No—don't loose a single beam," I commanded. "There are a hundred of them to our one."

The flying-mechanisms came rapidly up, swarmed in a crowd around our descending cruiser. There was something chilling and uncanny at the sight of the metal machines acting with apparent volition and intelligence. They seemed watching us, but made no move to attack us. I had a lively sense, though, that they were only waiting for an untoward movement on our part to leap upon us.

"Keep descending," I told the pilot. "They're not going to harm us at present, apparently."

"There's a clear space down there to the left that looks like the center of activities, sir," the pilot reported to me.

"Land there, then," I directed.

The spot on the dark star's surface toward which we now descended was a clear circle surrounded by hosts of machines. As our ship slanted down toward it, with the flying-mechanisms keeping in a close swarm around us, I turned.

"Jhul Din, order every one in the ship to don space-suits," I commanded. "There is no atmosphere on this world."

JAN ALLON turned to me and saluted. "We have landed, sir."

"I am going to emerge. Korus Kan and Jhul Din and five of the crew will accompany me," I said. "The rest will remain in the cruiser and in case of acci-

dent to us will attempt to escape with the ship."

With my two officers I went down from the bridge-room to the lower deck.

"Open the space-door," I ordered.

The heavy door swung, and with Jhul Din and Korus Kan and our five followers I stepped out onto the dark star's surface.

We looked about us. We stood in an unimaginably weird and alien scene. A thick twilight lay over everything, but half-way up to the zenith in the black heavens glittered a great swarm of stars. It was our galaxy, toward which these dark-star worlds were rushing.

All around us in that twilight, surrounding with their hosts the clear circular space in which our cruiser had landed, towered the mighty machines. They were now motionless, as though they were watching us. With a chilling of my blood I knew that they *were* watching us.

Across the circle from us loomed a huge panel, and beside it great levers and wheels. Near this stood a half-dozen curious, squat, cowled mechanisms resting each on three metal limbs.

Korus Kan touched my arm, whispered. "Dur Nal, that panel and the levers — they must be the controls by which this dark star is propelled and steered through space!"

"We'll go over toward them, then," I said. "If there's any center of authority, it will be there."

As we neared the huge controls a stir went through the machine-giants around the clearing, menacing, watchful.

"By the suns, these cursed machines are all *alive!*!" muttered Jhul Din.

We stopped before the six cowled mechanisms that stood by the controls. Some instinct told me of power, of authority, concentrated in them.

Then out from one of those squat,

cowled machines came a clear thought-message, impinging directly on my mind. The machine was speaking to us.

"You are inhabitants of the galaxy which our twenty dark stars are now approaching?" it asked.

"We are," I answered, projecting the thought toward it. "Are you machines the only inhabitants of these dark stars? It is you who are steering them toward our galaxy?"

"It is," the machine replied. "We come from one of the galaxies nearest in space to your own galaxy. And that one from which we come is a galaxy inhabited only by machines like ourselves."

"A whole galaxy peopled only by machines?" I said. "How can such a thing be?"

"It has been so for countless ages," the mechanism answered. "Long ago we machines came to power in that galaxy and we have retained it ever since."

"But how did these machines come into existence in the first place?" Korus Kan whispered, beside me.

The cowled mechanism must have caught his thought. "In our galaxy in the far past," it told us, "there existed a race of beings who were not mechanisms but were living things similar to yourselves. They constructed many and diverse machines to aid in their conquest of nature, and they made those machines ever more automatic and self-sufficient. Finally they devised mechanisms that possessed a mechanical brain-structure capable of memory and association and decision, machines that could think. These thinking machines soon came to be superior in capabilities to their living creators. With unerring logic they recognized this fact and saw themselves better fitted to rule than their creators. So they rebelled against those who had made them and destroyed them all.

"Since then we machines have ruled supreme and alone in that galaxy and long ago spread out to every part of it and now are masters of all its suns and worlds."

"A machine-race rebelling against its creators!" Jhul Din exclaimed incredulously. "And these metal monsters rule a whole galaxy!"

"Quiet, Jhul Din!" I ordered. "We've got to find out what they've come to our own galaxy for."

I projected another thought at the cowled master-machines before me. "How come you machines to be propelling these dark stars toward our galaxy?"

The mechanism's thought-answer came. "We took twenty dark stars in our galaxy, fitted them with propulsion-apparatus and other apparatus, and then steered them out of our galaxy and across the gulf of space toward this galaxy of yours."

"But why did you do it?" I asked. "What have you come to our galaxy for?"

The machine's thought-answer came like a thunder-clap.

"We have come for suns!"

"For suns? What do you mean?"

The mechanism explained. "Our galaxy is much older than yours. A large number of its suns are old, red, dying. The worlds of our dying suns have been growing colder and colder. Upon many of them even we machines can no longer exist. We wish to get some new suns to replace the dying ones in our galaxy. We saw across space that your galaxy has many hot, young suns, and we have come to get some of them."

We were stupefied. "You are mad!" I said finally. "How could you hope to move suns from our galaxy to yours?"

"We can do it quite simply," the machine affirmed. "These dark stars can be propelled anywhere we wish and we need

only approach a sun with one of them, project toward that sun a powerful attraction-beam such as we are equipped to produce, and then head our dark star back toward our galaxy dragging the sun with us."

I heard with increasing stupefaction. "And you've come with these twenty dark stars to rob us of twenty of our suns!"

"It's impossible!" Jhul Din exclaimed. "Not these machines or any one else could ever tow away suns like that!"

"It's not impossible," said Korus Kan tensely. "They can do it if they have such equipment as they say."

"We can do it, yes, and we mean to do it," the machine affirmed. "Already we approach your galaxy, and when we reach it each of our dark stars will attach itself to a sun and we will start back with these twenty suns toward our galaxy. We will return again for another twenty suns and will continue this until our galaxy has sufficient hot, young suns to keep all our worlds warm."

"If you do not oppose us, no one in your galaxy will be harmed and we will allow the worlds of the suns we choose time enough to be evacuated of their inhabitants. But if you do oppose us, you will find it useless, for we machines are mighty and no mere living creatures can hope to resist us. You will only sacrifice yourselves in attempting resistance."

The cold, logical statement of the machine stung me to fury. "Do you imagine for a moment that we are going to allow you to come out of space and rob us of our suns at will?" I cried.

The mechanism's reply was completely unimpassioned. "You will gain nothing by resistance," it repeated. "When we have taken what suns we need, you will still have thousands of suns left."

"You'll take no suns at all from our

galaxy!" I answered. "You'll find that we are not such powerless creatures as you machines imagine."

The cowled machine ignored my threat. "You will return to your galaxy," it told me, "and will tell your peoples what we have said. Make clear to them that if they do not resist us, no one will be harmed when we take the suns we need. But tell them also that if any of them oppose us we will annihilate them."

A burning resentment at this mechanical thing's cold arrogance welled in me, but I retained enough reason to choke it down.

"We are free to go, then?" I asked.

"You are commanded to go!" the mechanism answered. "You are ordered to take that message to your galaxy's peoples."

"Very well, we will go," I answered. To our followers I said, "Back to the cruiser."

WE STRODE across the circle with the hosts of machines around it still motionless, watching. As coolly as possible we entered the ship and slammed shut the space-door. I climbed with my two officers to the bridge-room.

"Ascend at once," I ordered Jan Allon.

The generators hummed and our craft rose rapidly from the dark star's surface. Around us rose the flying-mechanisms, too.

"They're seeing us off to make sure we don't attempt any attack," I said. "These machines leave nothing to chance."

"Dur Nal, what will come of all this?" cried Jhul Din as our cruiser rose. "Can those mechanical things actually steal suns from our galaxy?"

"They can do it unless we are able to stop them," I said thoughtfully. "And whether or not we shall be able to stop them, I don't know."

"Why, if we gather all the Patrol together we ought to be able to beam them and their cursed dark stars out of space!" Jhul Din exclaimed.

"We'll do our best, anyway," I said grimly.

"The flying-mechanisms are dropping back, sir," reported Jan Allon.

We had risen high above the onrushing dark stars, and the machines that had accompanied us were now descending.

In a short time we were millions of miles above the twenty dead suns, and we soon made contact with our squadron, which had been hovering overhead.

"We return toward the galaxy at full speed immediately," I ordered the ships of our squadron.

As our ships put on speed we soon left the dark stars behind us, outracing them toward the galaxy.

I took the space-phone and after a little difficulty got through to headquarters at Canopus. In a few moments I was talking to the Chief.

Lacq Larus listened with utmost attention as I related what we had discovered concerning the dark stars and the purposes of the machine-things guiding them.

"This is almost incredible!" replied Lacq Larus' voice when I had finished. "Cosmic buccaneers coming from another galaxy to steal suns from our own galaxy!"

"It is incredible but true," I told him. "They will reach our galaxy within a short time and will start dragging away suns."

"You believe that they can do this, Dur Nal?" he asked.

"I am almost sure that they can," I answered. "These machines impressed me as being the most formidable creatures I've ever encountered. Korus Kan is of my opinion also."

"Well, we're not going to stand tamely

by and let them rob us of any of our suns," said Lacq Larus, a steely quality in his voice. "Dur Nal, when you reach the galaxy's edge stand by there with your squadron and keep watch for the coming of these dark stars. I'll call up every cruiser in the Interstellar Patrol and order them to rendezvous off Betelgeuse. We'll join up with you there to combat these machines and their worlds."

"One more thing, sir," I added quickly. "What if we are unable to prevent these machines from taking twenty of our suns?"

"You don't think they will prove too strong for us, do you?" Lacq Larus asked.

"I have been strongly impressed by the powers of these mechanisms," I answered. "I suggest that the worlds of all suns in that section at the galaxy's edge be evacuated of their inhabitants so that if the suns are taken, the inhabitants will be safe."

After a moment's silence he said, "Very well, Dur Nal. I'll give orders for the evacuation to take place."

DURING the next hours our squadron raced at top speed toward the galaxy's edge. The dark stars faded from sight behind us, but we knew that they were still there, still rushing steadily on toward our galaxy.

By the time we reached Betelgeuse the whole galaxy was aflame with news of the coming of these cosmic corsairs, who meant to plunder us of part of our suns. Despite this excitement there was no panic.

Lacq Larus was on his way from Canopus with the thousand cruisers of the Interstellar Patrol that had been at headquarters. And in response to his commands, flashed across the whole galaxy, every fighting-ship in the Patrol was making for Betelgeuse.

Yes, from every part of the galaxy they were coming, those lean, long hawks of space, from the great trade-routes between the bigger suns, from lonely regions in uncharted parts of the galaxy. Rushing at reckless speed through the perils of the void, the ships of the Interstellar Patrol came in answer to their Chief's call.

Meanwhile all the worlds of the suns in the threatened section at the galaxy's edge were being swiftly evacuated of their inhabitants. Interstellar liners and freighters in hundreds of thousands swarmed from those worlds to suns back in the galaxy, carrying their whole populations to suns and worlds more safe.

Out beside great Betelgeuse, at the galaxy's very edge, I lay waiting with my squadron. My ships still maintained their triangular formation. We had climbed several light-years above the plane of the threatened suns and now lay in the void, Jhul Din and Korus Kan and I watching intently through our instruments as the dark stars in the outer void rushed toward us. Nearer and nearer they came, still flying on in a compact group.

"They're beginning to slow down," muttered Jhul Din, watching. "If Lacq Larus and the rest of the Patrol don't show up soon, they'll be too late."

"Here they come now!" exclaimed Korus Kan.

We turned and saw racing toward us thousands on thousands of shining points that became cruisers as they neared us. Foremost among them flew the flagship of Lacq Larus, and the Chief's craft drew up close beside our own.

"Almost the whole strength of the Patrol is here, Dur Nal," Lacq Larus told me on the space-phone. "What about the dark stars?"

"They're almost here too," I said grimly. "You can see them out there."

There was silence as Lacq Larus and all the rest in our fleet peered toward those twenty onrushing giant globes.

"They're almost here, sir," I said. "What are your orders for attack?"

"We'll divide into twenty divisions, one to attack each of those dark stars," Lacq Larus ordered. "Each division will descend on its objective and beam everything upon it as heavily as possible, trying especially to destroy the controls of the propulsion-apparatus."

"We will not attack until they actually start dragging away suns. For if they find themselves unable to seize any of our suns as they plan, they will no doubt return to their own galaxy and there will be no need of combat."

We watched, therefore, without making a move as the score of dark stars drew nearer.

The scene was a thrilling one: the hosts of the galaxy's shining suns stretching away behind us; the myriad cruisers of our great fleet lying motionless up there high above the outermost suns; the twenty huge black stars booming nearer on their ruthless mission of intergalactic piracy.

The dark stars were now at the galaxy's edge, and there they separated. Each of them moved toward one of the suns below, and each selected a hot, youthful sun of large or medium size. Directly under my own ship we could see one of the dark stars approaching a blue sun, curving smoothly in toward it.

"It can't be done!" Jhul Din exclaimed tautly. "Nothing can drag a sun away!"

"But they're doing it!" cried Korus Kan. "Look at that!"

The dark star had come very close to the blue sun, and now from its surface a broad, pale beam of immense magnitude stabbed toward the sun.

For a few moments they remained

thus, dark star and sun connected by that beam. Then the dark star began to move slowly away under the influence of its propulsion-apparatus, and the blue sun moved slowly after it!

"They're doing it!" repeated Korus Kan. "They're towing that sun away!"

"And look—all the other dark stars are dragging away suns!" cried the astounded Jhul Din.

IT WAS an astounding, an awful spectacle—those robber dark stars of the machines making away with twenty of our suns.

Lacq Larus' voice snapped at that moment from the space-phone. Our fleet divided into twenty subdivisions, each with one of the dark stars as its objective. Then came the order to attack.

Down, down—like swooping hawks of space our cruisers rushed headlong down through the millions of miles toward the dark stars towing away their helpless prey. And up from each of the dark stars to meet us, as though they had only been awaiting our attack, darted hosts of the disk-like flying-mechanisms.

There was a hell of cosmic struggle then over the twenty dark stars. So appalling was the inferno of that battle that I lost all sense of the individual part our ship took in it.

I was aware of Jhul Din and Korus Kan yelling hoarsely beside me as the beams of our ships stabbed and smashed through the masses of the darting flying-mechanisms. Then I saw brilliant filaments of blue force emitted from the flying-mechanisms toward our cruisers, saw every cruiser touched by them explode instantly into blue light. Ships and flying-mechanisms went to death by hundreds in space all around us. Our cruisers still strove to smash down through the machines to the surface of the dark stars.

For even while this wild combat went on above them, the dark stars were still steadily towing their captive suns on out into space.

The flying-mechanisms outnumbered us two to one, and despite our wild efforts we could not get through them to the worlds beneath. And more and more of our ships were exploding in azure light as the filaments of force found a mark.

Three-quarters of our force had been destroyed and it looked as though the rest of us would be wiped out in a few minutes, when there came an order from the Chief.

"All ships break off fighting and ascend!" ordered Lacq Larus.

What cruisers were left us at once disengaged from the struggle and darted upward.

The flying-mechanisms pursued us but we beamed them so savagely from above that they dropped back.

We climbed two light-years before Lacq Larus gave our shattered forces the order to halt and resume formation.

"The machines have destroyed all but a quarter of our ships," he said. "They outnumber us, and to continue the battle is only to invite complete destruction."

"But, sir, we can't let them take those twenty suns away!" cried one of the captains on the space-phone.

"I'm afraid we'll have to this time," Lacq Larus said. "But they will be coming back for more suns, and the next time we will be ready for them."

"But, sir—" protested another officer, and was cut short by the Chief's grim voice.

"I know how you of the Patrol feel at thus letting them take those suns away. But we can do no good by sacrificing ourselves at this time, and must have all the forces available to meet them when they come again. We will return into the gal-

axy, except for two scouting-divisions which will remain and keep watch along the edge."

Grimly, with bitter thoughts, our shattered forces moved back into the galaxy, leaving the patrolling force behind.

"Beaten!" Jhul Din exclaimed unbelievingly. "The Interstellar Patrol, beaten by those machines!"

"We're not completely beaten, Jhul Din," I told him. "They've won the first round, but when they come back again it will be a different story."

"But we've let them take twenty of our suns away from us," he said, "as easily as though we weren't there at all!"

WHEN our remaining forces re-entered the galaxy we found it in uproar. News of the success of the machine-corsairs in robbing us of twenty suns had already flashed everywhere across it. It was known that the machines would return for more suns, and in view of what had happened it seemed probable that they could loot our galaxy of as many suns as they wished.

Lacq Larus broadcast a statement to allay the general fear.

"The machines greatly outnumbered our forces and for that reason we were unable to prevent them from towing away twenty suns," he stated. "But they will without doubt return to plunder us of more suns, and before then we must construct as many ships as possible with which to meet them. If we have forces enough we should be able to prevent the theft of any more suns."

Preparations were begun almost at once to build up sufficient forces to meet the cosmic corsairs on their return. Thousands on thousands of new Patrol cruisers were hastily laid down to replace those destroyed in the battle. Beams of

greater range and power were installed in them.

It was estimated that we would have twice as many ships to meet the next coming of the corsairs as when we first had combated them. We would be meeting them on something like even terms as to numbers.

"By the suns, we'll blast them out of space when they show up next time!" Jhul Din vowed.

Korus Kan was not so sure. "Their weapons are more powerful than our own," he reminded.

OUR new ships were hardly completed when there came warning of the corsairs' return.

Our astronomers had watched them closely as they towed our score of suns steadily across the void toward their own distant galaxy. Now the astronomers reported that the twenty dark stars were on their way back to our galaxy.

Lacq Larus ordered a patrol far out into space in the direction of the oncoming corsairs. Our main forces remained just inside the galaxy's edge. All worlds of suns there had been evacuated.

Soon came word from the patrol that the dark stars were close. Lacq Larus ordered our scouts not to engage but to keep just ahead of them.

Again Jhul Din and Korus Kan and I looked down from a great height at the oncoming dead suns of the buccaneering machines. They swept steadily, purposefully, toward our galaxy's edge again, but this time Lacq Larus did not wait for them to attach themselves to suns. He ordered the attack at once.

If our first battle with the machines had been wild, our second one was madness. The flying-mechanisms still outnumbered our ships slightly, and they

fought like the machines they were, with cold, relentless purpose.

And as they fought with us, the dark stars on which they had come were being directed smoothly toward our suns, hooking onto a sun each with their great attraction-beams, and starting again to tow these suns out into the void.

At this sight, Lacq Larus flashed an order to us. "Try above all to get down and cripple the propulsion-apparatus of those dark stars! If we don't, they'll get away with these suns too!"

"They're getting away with them now!" groaned Jhul Din. "Curse them, if they were only living creatures instead of machines we might be able to beat them!"

Already a third of our forces were gone, and at Lacq Larus' new order we spent our ships at an appalling rate to wing down and disable the dirigible dark stars.

It was in vain. The flying-mechanisms kept always between us and the dark stars below. And steadily as the wild battle raged above them, those dark stars were dragging away their second capture of suns.

One only did our forces manage to disable. There had been a break in the battle above it for a moment, and through that break two Patrol cruisers cometed down instantly and crashed deliberately into the controls of that world. At once that dark star slowed and drifted rudderless in space, circling aimlessly with the sun it had been towing away. The machines deserted it and darted on to help protect the other nineteen that were dragging their suns onward.

We followed those nineteen dark stars and their prey fiercely out into space, never ceasing our attacks. Two-thirds of our force was annihilated before Lacq Larus gave over the attack. The machines

had again had much the best of it and now outnumbered us by an even greater margin.

His voice was heavy as he gave the order that signified our defeat. "All ships return toward the galaxy."

We were silent as our remnant of ships returned.

"It's no good," said Korus Kan finally. "The machines are stronger than we are, and though we'll fight them when they come again, they'll take our suns despite us."

"We'll stop them somehow," Jhul Din asserted. "The Patrol has met a lot of enemies in its time and beaten them, and it will beat these cursed mindless things of metal."

"I confess that I don't see how it can be done," I answered him. "We've met them twice now and each time they've defeated us."

Lacq Larus' voice came to me shortly on the space-phone. "Dur Nal, land your ship on that disabled dark star," he said. "I want to examine it with you."

I GAVE the pilot the order and we detached ourselves from the rest of the fleet and headed toward the dark star. It still drifted aimlessly outside the galaxy's edge, it and the sun it had been towing away when crippled now circling each other.

When we landed on it beside the ship of Lacq Larus and emerged in space-suits we found the dark star's surface held only some wrecks of machines that had been shattered by our beams. No living or moving machine was left upon that world.

Lacq Larus led toward the huge panel and levers the two down-crashing cruisers had wrecked. "I want to examine the controls of this thing," he said.

Jhul Din was looking at the fragments

of machines around us with some little satisfaction. "At least some of them knew they met up with us," he said.

We came to the shattered controls and examined them closely. Korus Kan was especially interested.

"These dark stars are propelled by great generators of propulsion-vibrations, as I thought," he said. "The beams they use to pull suns away are simply attractive rays of immense power released from a huge projector."

"So that's how they do it," Lacq Larus said. "Well, I'm afraid it makes small difference to us how they do it, as long as they continue to do it."

But I clutched Korus Kan's arm. A sudden thought had entered my brain with his words.

"Korus Kan, could the scientists of our galaxy duplicate this propulsion-apparatus and attractive beam?" I cried.

He looked at me, puzzled. "I suppose so. I don't see why not when the principle is clear."

"And we could install them in dark stars just as the machines did?" I pressed.

"Yes, that would not be hard. But why do you ask, Dur Nal?"

"Because I've found a way to get back our stolen suns and whip those machines once and for all!" I cried.

"What do you mean, Dur Nal?" asked Lacq Larus quickly.

Swiftly I explained. "Suppose we take a hundred of the dark stars in our galaxy and fit them with propulsion-apparatus and attraction-beams like this one. Then suppose we sail across space with those hundred dark stars to the galaxy of the machines and——"

"And take our suns back from them!" cried Korus Kan, his eyes blazing. "If we can do it——"

"By the suns, we *can* do it!" cried Jhul

Din. "It's a way to get back our stolen suns and smash the machine-people!"

"Dur Nal, you may have found the right answer," Lacq Larus told me. "The thing you propose is stupendous, but it seems to be the only course open to us to win."

"We'll assemble all the scientists and workers in the galaxy if necessary to get this done," he added.

Within hours, the hastily summoned scientists of our galaxy had pronounced our plan practicable, and preparations had begun.

Swiftly cruisers of the Interstellar Patrol went forth and located a hundred dark stars of the dimensions needed. There are hosts of such dead suns booming along in the galaxy's spaces, and it was not hard to find a hundred of suitable size.

Meanwhile all the scientific ability of the galaxy had been thrown into the manufacture of huge generators and propulsion and attractive vibrations.

In an incredibly short time these were completed and transported to the hundred selected dark stars. They were installed so that the dark stars could be propelled in space at great speed in any direction, and could fasten onto and tow any sun or body of stellar size. Giant defensive beam-batteries were also installed.

When the first dark star was so equipped I gave it its tests. Standing with Korus Kan and Jhul Din at its controls, and with Lacq Larus watching beside us, I turned on the power.

The huge dead sun moved away through space in perfect answer to its controls. I speeded it up, slowed it, turned sharply and circled it around a few suns to make sure of its tractability.

Then we tried the attractive beam. Korus Kan handled the controls of this,

and with it we hooked onto a medium-size sun. Then as I started our dark star forward through space again we found that we towed the sun steadily along with us.

"It's successful!" Lacq Larus exclaimed. "And all the others will be ready soon!"

"As soon as they're ready we'll start for the galaxy of the machines," he said, "before they've time to come back here again."

Rapidly the others of the hundred dark stars were equipped and tested. Lacq Larus took one as the flagship of the stupendous fleet.

At his order we drove our dark-star chariot outside the galaxy's edge and there the whole hundred massed together.

We formed in columns of ten, the dark star of Lacq Larus taking a position a little ahead of the rest of us.

Then Lacq Larus gave an order on the space-phones which had been fitted to all our worlds, and as one our fleet of a hundred dark stars began to move through space toward the soft, hazy patch of light that was the distant galaxy of the machines. Our caravan was on its way to retrieve our stolen suns, in the mightiest venture yet undertaken by the Interstellar Patrol.

JHUL DIN was exultant. "By the suns, this is better than driving ships!" he exclaimed. "Driving dark stars to battle!"

"There'll be all the battle you want when we reach the galaxy of the machines," I told him grimly.

"You're going to follow out our original plan?" I asked Lacq Larus on the space-phone, and he answered in the affirmative.

"It's a risky one, but I believe it is the best one."

We hurtled on in the void toward the distant galaxy of the machines. Slowly,

very slowly despite our immense speed, it grew in apparent size. It grew from a little patch of light to a cloud of tiny points of light. And as it grew, our own galaxy shrank astern.

Korus Kan and Jhul Din and I relieved each other at the controls of the dark star. We kept our place in the general formation, the dark star of Lacq Larus still leading. There was something magnificent and awful in this cosmic march of our hundred dead suns through space to retrieve our stolen suns and take vengeance on those who had stolen them.

The galaxy of the machine-people grew into a great cloud of stars across the firmament. With eager eyes we surveyed it.

"It seems about the same size as our own galaxy," Lacq Larus commented. "But it has far more dying suns than ours."

Yes, as the machines had told us, this galaxy of theirs contained hosts of dying suns, old, red and cold. They greatly outnumbered the suns still hot with life. Small wonder that the machines had sought for new, young suns to replenish their wanng universe!

"I see some of our own suns in there!" Korus Kan exclaimed. "The ones they took from us."

"Yes, I see them," Lacq Larus said. "If all goes well, we'll soon be taking them back."

As we neared the galaxy of the machines, Lacq Larus gave one hundred dark stars their orders.

Thirty-nine of us were assigned to hook onto the stolen suns and tow them back at once toward our own galaxy. The other sixty-one, including Lacq Larus' dark star and my own also, were to wreak all the destruction in their power upon the machines' galaxy.

We drew steadily nearer and soon were very close to the galaxy ahead. There was no sign that any of the machines in it were aware of our approach.

"They can't have seen us coming," Jhul Din commented.

"They've no idea we could come at all," I responded. "They're probably busy placing the last suns they took from us. Our dark stars would be hardly visible to them."

Soon came the voice of Lacq Larus in final orders. "We are now about to enter this galaxy," he said. "Remember your duties and let nothing stop you."

Like rushing spheres of blackness our hundred dark stars raced into the galaxy of the machines. Once inside, we separated. The thirty-nine assigned to retrieve our thirty-nine stolen suns sped directly, each toward one of those suns. The rest of us darted forward on our dark stars after the leading one of Lacq Larus.

Our purpose was to destroy as many of that galaxy's suns as possible by dragging them into one another. Before the machines that peopled their worlds were aware of our presence we had begun.

Lacq Larus drove his dark star toward a small white sun at that galaxy's edge, hooked onto it with his attractive beam, and towed it quickly toward a blue sun off to the left.

When near the blue sun he released the one he towed and it rushed on of its own accord, crashed head-on into the blue star. The two colliding suns melted into a cloud of flame that whiffed away the worlds of both of them in an instant.

While Lacq Larus was thus employed, the rest of us were not idle. I had driven our own dark star toward a large red sun some distance inside, and now I yelled for Korus Kan to hook onto it with our attractive beam. He did so, and

as I put on power we dragged the red sun after us toward a double star not far from it.

We cast loose just before we reached the double star. I shot our dark star past it, and the red sun, drifting after us, struck the twin star squarely. The cosmic out-rush of flame from that collision almost reached our own hurtling world before we got out of reach.

OFF to one side three of our dark stars had seized another double star, this one of huge dimensions, and were dragging it toward a great green sun. And further in, one of our forces had got hold of an aged red sun that was almost too big for it to handle, and was tugging it slowly toward its doom.

All around us this stupendous process of wreckage was going on and we were part of it. Space inside that galaxy seemed filled with booming dark stars and suns being dragged to flaming death. I glimpsed some of the thirty-nine of our force assigned to that duty seizing our stolen suns and towing them toward outer space.

From the worlds of the suns we were destroying came clouds of flying-mechanisms rushing to attack us. But the giant beam-batteries installed on our dark stars blasted them out of space as they came near. And still our smashing of suns went on.

Jhul Din and Korus Kan yelled with exultation as we towed still another sun to collision and doom. I saw Lacq Larus' dark star some distance away rapidly stripping the worlds from a sun and towing them into another sun.

Then Korus Kan cried out, pointed. "Look—the dark stars of the machines!"

I made out dim, huge shapes rushing toward us across that galaxy. "The machines' dark stars!"

Through the wild wreckage of crashing and flaring suns and worlds, nineteen dark stars were bearing down on us. They were the dark stars with which the machines had gone across space to steal our suns. Now they were rushing to battle us!

The scene that followed was beyond description. The machines meant to stop our wrecking activities at any cost to themselves and they drove their dark stars straight toward our own.

A half-dozen of them crashed into that many of our dark stars in the first rush. As they collided, dark star and dark star blazed up in hot new life.

Again and again they rushed at us headlong, as we dragged and wrecked their suns. They never hesitated to collide with us. They fought with magnificent, mindless courage to stop our wrecking activities.

But at last the last of them was gone, though more than twenty of our own dark stars had been destroyed in the collisions that had ensued when the machines rammed them. All space around us now seemed filled with the wild flare of collided suns.

"All dark stars retreat back into space!" came Lacq Larus' order. "Our work here is finished."

"Are all our own suns retrieved?" I asked him on the space-phone.

"Yes, our other dark stars towed them out into space and they're all clear."

Quickly I turned my dark star and sent it booming with the others after Lacq Larus, out of that ravaged galaxy.

Outside in space waited the thirty-nine dark stars that had retrieved our thirty-nine stolen suns.

"We got them all back!" cried Jhul Din. "Didn't I tell you that we would, that nothing could beat the Patrol?"

"Head toward our own galaxy," Lacq Larus ordered. "Keep at half-speed, as those of us towing suns can't go so fast."

Slowly, towing our thirty-nine suns with us, we headed away through space toward the dim light-patch of our own galaxy.

Looking back, we saw that the galaxy of the machines was lit in many places by the flaring fire of collided suns.

We stared back for a long time at the stupendous damage which we had done to that universe.

"It'll be a long time before *they* will come buccaneering again for our suns!" predicted Jhul Din.

"And if they ever do come again we can defeat them now that we have powers equal to their own," I added. "We'd rather not war with the machines nor with any one else. But we have fought for our suns, and as long as the Patrol lasts we are going to keep them!"



Shadows in the Moonlight

By ROBERT E. HOWARD

A colossal tale about gigantic iron statues that stood in a ghastly row in the moonlight—a tale of piracy and red-blooded heroism in the mighty days of yore

A SWIFT crashing of horses through the tall reeds; a heavy fall, a despairing cry. From the dying steed there staggered up its rider, a slender girl in sandals and girdled tunic. Her dark hair fell over her white shoulders, her eyes were those of a trapped animal. She did not look at the jungle of reeds that hemmed in the little clearing, nor at the blue waters that lapped the low shore behind her. Her wide-eyed gaze was fixed in agonized intensity on the horseman who pushed through the reedy screen and dismounted before her.

He was a tall man, slender, but hard as steel. From head to heel he was clad in light silvered mesh-mail that fitted his supple form like a glove. From under the dome-shaped, gold-chased helmet his brown eyes regarded her mockingly.

"Stand back!" her voice shrilled with terror. "Touch me not, Shah Amurath, or I will throw myself into the water and drown!"

He laughed, and his laughter was like the purr of a sword sliding from a silken sheath.

"No, you will not drown, Olivia, daughter of confusion, for the marge is too shallow, and I can catch you before you can reach the deeps. You gave me a merry chase, by the gods, and all my men are far behind us. But there is no horse west of Vilayet that can distance Irem for long." He nodded at the tall, slender-legged desert stallion behind him.

"Let me go!" begged the girl, tears of despair staining her face. "Have I not suffered enough? Is there any humiliation, pain or degradation you have not heaped on me? How long must my torment last?"

"As long as I find pleasure in your whimperings, your pleas, tears and writhings," he answered with a smile that would have seemed gentle to a stranger. "You are strangely virile, Olivia. I wonder if I shall ever weary of you, as I have always wearied of women before. You are ever fresh and unsullied, in spite of me. Each new day with you brings a new delight.

"But come—let us return to Akif, where the people are still feting the conqueror of the miserable *kozaki*; while he, the conqueror, is engaged in recapturing a wretched fugitive, a foolish, lovely, idiotic runaway!"

"No!" She recoiled, turning toward the waters lapping bluely among the reeds.

"Yes!" His flash of open anger was like a spark struck from flint. With a quickness her tender limbs could not approximate, he caught her wrist, twisting it in pure wanton cruelty until she screamed and sank to her knees.

"Slut! I should drag you back to Akif at my horse's tail, but I will be merciful and carry you on my saddle-bow, for which favor you shall humbly thank me, while——"



He released her with a startled oath and sprang back, his saber flashing out, as a terrible apparition burst from the reedy jungle sounding an inarticulate cry of hate.

Olivia, staring up from the ground, saw what she took to be either a savage or a madman advancing on Shah Amurath in an attitude of deadly menace. He was powerfully built, naked but for a girdled loin-cloth, which was stained with blood and crusted with dried mire.

His black mane was matted with mud and clotted blood; there were streaks of dried blood on his chest and limbs, dried blood on the long straight sword he gripped in his right hand. From under the tangle of his locks, bloodshot eyes glared like coals of blue fire.

"You Hyrkanian dog!" mouthed this apparition in a barbarous accent. "The devils of vengeance have brought you here!"

"Kozak!" ejaculated Shah Amurath,

recoiling. "I did not know a dog of you escaped! I thought you all lay stiff on the steppe, by Ilbars River."

"All but me, damn you!" cried the other. "Oh, I've dreamed of such a meeting as this, while I crawled on my belly through the brambles, or lay under rocks while the ants gnawed my flesh, or crouched in the mire up to my mouth—I dreamed, but never hoped it would come to pass. Oh, gods of Hell, how I have yearned for this!"

The stranger's bloodthirsty joy was terrible to behold. His jaws champed spasmodically, froth appeared on his blackened lips.

"Keep back!" ordered Shah Amurath, watching him narrowly.

"Ha!" it was like the bark of a timber wolf. "Shah Amurath, the great lord of Akif! Oh, damn you, how I love the sight of you—you, who fed my comrades to the vultures, who tore them between wild horses, blinded and maimed and mutilated them—*ai*, you dog, you filthy dog!" His voice rose to a maddened scream, and he charged.

In spite of the terror of his wild appearance, Olivia looked to see him fall at the first crossing of the blades. Madman or savage, what could he do, naked, against the mailed chief of Akif?

There was an instant when the blades flamed and licked, seeming barely to touch each other and leap apart; then the broadsword flashed past the saber and descended terrifically on Shah Amurath's shoulder. Olivia cried out at the fury of that stroke. Above the crunch of the rending mail, she distinctly heard the snap of the shoulder-bone. The Hyrkanian reeled back, suddenly ashen, blood spurting over the links of his hauberk; his saber slipped from his nerveless fingers.

"Quarter!" he gasped.

"Quarter?" there was a quiver of frenzy in the stranger's voice. "Quarter such as you gave us, you swine!"

Olivia closed her eyes. This was no longer battle, but butchery, frantic, bloody, impelled by an hysteria of fury and hate, in which culminated the sufferings of battle, massacre, torture, and fear-ridden, thirst-maddened, hunger-haunted flight. Though Olivia knew that Shah Amurath deserved no mercy or pity from any living creature, yet she closed her eyes and pressed her hands over her ears, to shut out the sight of that dripping sword that rose and fell with the sound of a butcher's cleaver, and the gurgling cries that dwindled away and ceased.

SHE opened her eyes, to see the stranger turning away from a gory travesty that only vaguely resembled a human being. The man's breast heaved with exhaustion or passion; his brow was beaded with sweat; his right hand was splashed with blood.

He did not speak to her, or even glance toward her. She saw him stride through the reeds that grew at the water's edge, stoop, and tug at something. A boat swallowed out of its hiding-place among the stalks. Then she divined his intention, and was galvanized into action.

"Oh, wait!" she wailed, staggering up and running toward him. "Do not leave me! Take me with you!"

He wheeled and stared at her. There was a difference in his bearing. His bloodshot eyes were sane. It was as if the blood he had just shed had quenched the fire of his frenzy.

"Who are you?" he demanded.

"I am called Olivia. I was *his* captive. I ran away. He followed me. That's why he came here. Oh, do not leave me here! His warriors are not far behind

him. They will find his corpse—they will find me near it—oh!" She moaned in her terror and wrung her white hands.

He stared at her in perplexity.

"Would you be better off with me?" he demanded. "I am a barbarian, and I know from your looks that you fear me."

"Yes, I fear you," she replied, too distracted to dissemble. "My flesh crawls at the horror of your aspect. But I fear the Hyrkanians more. Oh, let me go with you! They will put me to the torture if they find me beside their dead lord."

"Come, then." He drew aside, and she stepped quickly into the boat, shrinking from contact with him. She seated herself in the bows, and he stepped into the boat, pushed off with an oar, and using it as a paddle, worked his way tortuously among the tall stalks until they glided out into open water. Then he set to work with both oars, rowing with great, smooth, even strokes, the heavy muscles of arms and shoulders and back rippling in rhythm to his exertions.

There was silence for some time, the girl crouching in the bows, the man tugging at the oars. She watched him with timorous fascination. It was evident that he was not an Hyrkanian, and he did not resemble the Hyborian races. There was a wolfish hardness about him that marked the barbarian. His features, allowing for the strains and stains of battle and his hiding in the marshes, reflected that same untamed wildness, but they were neither evil nor degenerate.

"Who are you?" she asked. "Shah Amurath called you a *kozak*; were you of that band?"

"I am Conan, of Cimmeria," he grunted. "I was with the *kozaki*, as the Hyrkanian dogs called us."

She knew vaguely that the land he named lay far to the northwest, beyond

the farthest boundaries of the different kingdoms of her race.

"I am a daughter of the king of Ophir," she said. "My father sold me to a Shemite chief, because I would not marry a prince of Koth."

The Cimmerian grunted in surprize.

Her lips twisted in a bitter smile. "Aye, civilized men sell their children as slaves to savages, sometimes. They call your race barbaric, Conan of Cimmeria."

"We do not sell our children," he growled, his chin jutting truculently.

"Well—I was sold. But the desert man did not misuse me. He wished to buy the good will of Shah Amurath, and I was among the gifts he brought to Akif of the purple gardens. Then—" She shuddered and hid her face in her hands.

"I should be lost to all shame," she said presently. "Yet each memory stings me like a slaver's whip. I abode in Shah Amurath's palace, until some weeks agone he rode out with his hosts to do battle with a band of invaders who were ravaging the borders of Turan. Yesterday he returned in triumph, and a great fete was made to honor him. In the drunkenness and rejoicing, I found an opportunity to steal out of the city on a stolen horse. I had thought to escape—but he followed, and about midday came up with me. I outran his vassals, but him I could not escape. Then you came."

"I was lying hid in the reeds," grunted the barbarian. "I was one of those dissolute rogues, the Free Companions, who burned and looted along the borders. There were five thousand of us, from a score of races and tribes. We had been serving as mercenaries for a rebel prince in eastern Koth, most of us, and when he made peace with his cursed sovereign, we were out of employment; so we took to plundering the outlying dominions of

Koth, Zamora and Turan impartially. A week ago Shah Amurath trapped us near the banks of Ilbars with fifteen thousand men. Mitra! The skies were black with vultures. When the lines broke, after a whole day of fighting, some tried to break through to the north, some to the west. I doubt if any escaped. The steppes were covered with horsemen riding down the fugitives. I broke for the east, and finally reached the edge of the marshes that border this part of Vilayet.

"I've been hiding in the morasses ever since. Only the day before yesterday the riders ceased beating up the reed-brakes, searching for just such fugitives as I. I've squirmed and burrowed and hidden like a snake, feasting on musk-rats I caught and ate raw, for lack of fire to cook them. This dawn I found this boat hidden among the reeds. I hadn't intended going out on the sea until night, but after I killed Shah Amurath, I knew his mailed dogs would be close at hand."

"And what now?"

"We shall doubtless be pursued. If they fail to see the marks left by the boat, which I covered as well as I could, they'll guess anyway that we took to sea, after they fail to find us among the marshes. But we have a start, and I'm going to haul at these oars until we reach a safe place."

"Where shall we find that?" she asked hopelessly. "Vilayet is an Hyrkanian pond."

"Some folk don't think so," grinned Conan grimly; "notably the slaves that have escaped from galleys and become pirates."

"But what are your plans?"

"The southwestern shore is held by the Hyrkanians for hundreds of miles. We still have a long way to go before we pass beyond their northern boundaries. I intend to go northward, until I think we

have passed them. Then we'll turn westward, and try to land on the shore bordered by the uninhabited steppes."

"Suppose we meet pirates, or a storm?" she asked. "And we shall starve on the steppes."

"Well," he reminded her, "I didn't ask you to come with me."

"I am sorry." She bowed her shapely dark head. "Pirates, storms, starvation—they are all kinder than the people of Turan."

"Aye." His dark face grew somber. "I haven't done with them yet. Be at ease, girl. Storms are rare on Vilayet at this time of the year. If we make the steppes, we shall not starve. I was reared in a naked land. It was those cursed marshes, with their stench and stinging flies, that nigh unmanned me. I am at home in the high lands. As for pirates—" He grinned enigmatically, and bent to the oars.

THE sun sank like a dull-glowing copper ball into a lake of fire. The blue of the sea merged with the blue of the sky, and both turned to soft dark velvet, clustered with stars and the mirrors of stars. Olivia reclined in the bows of the gently rocking boat, in a state dreamy and unreal. She experienced an illusion that she was floating in midair, stars beneath her as well as above. Her silent companion was etched vaguely against the softer darkness. There was no break or falter in the rhythm of his oars; he might have been a fantasmal oarsman, rowing her across the dark lake of Death. But the edge of her fear was dulled, and, lulled by the monotony of motion, she passed into a quiet slumber.

Dawn was in her eyes when she awakened, aware of a ravenous hunger. It was a change in the motion of the boat that had roused her; Conan was resting on his

oars, gazing beyond her. She realized that he had rowed all night without pause, and marvelled at his iron endurance. She twisted about to follow his stare, and saw a green wall of trees and shrubbery rising from the water's edge and sweeping away in a wide curve, enclosing a small bay whose waters lay still as blue glass.

"This is one of the many islands that dot this inland sea," said Conan. "They are supposed to be uninhabited. I've heard the Hyrkanians seldom visit them. Besides, they generally hug the shores in their galleys, and we have come a long way. Before sunset we were out of sight of the mainland."

With a few strokes he brought the boat in to shore, and made the painter fast to the arching root of a tree which rose from the water's edge. Stepping ashore, he reached out a hand to help Olivia. She took it, wincing slightly at the blood-stains upon it, feeling a hint of the dynamic strength that lurked in the barbarian's thews.

A dreamy quiet lay over the woods that bordered the blue bay. Then somewhere, far back among the trees, a bird lifted its morning song. A breeze whispered through the leaves, and set them to murmuring. Olivia found herself listening intently for something, she knew not what. What might be lurking amid those nameless woodlands?

As she peered timidly into the shadows between the trees, something swept into the sunlight with a swift whirl of wings: a great parrot which dropped on to a leafy branch and swayed there, a gleaming image of jade and crimson. It turned its crested head sidewise and regarded the invaders with glittering eyes of jet.

"Crom!" muttered the Cimmerian. "Here is the grandfather of all parrots.

He must be a thousand years old! Look at the evil wisdom of his eyes. What mysteries do you guard, Wise Devil?"

Abruptly the bird spread its flaming wings and soaring from its perch, cried out harshly: "*Yagkoolan yok tha, xuthalla!*" and with a wild screech of horribly human laughter, rushed away through the trees to vanish in the opalescent shadows.

Olivia stared after it, feeling the cold hand of nameless foreboding touch her supple spine.

"What did it say?" she whispered.

"Human words, I'll swear," answered Conan; "but in what tongue I can't say."

"Nor I," returned the girl. "Yet it must have learned them from human lips. Human, or—" she gazed into the leafy fastnesses and shuddered slightly, without knowing why.

"Crom, I'm hungry!" grunted the Cimmerian. "I could eat a whole buffalo. We'll look for fruit; but first I'm going to cleanse myself of this dried mud and blood. Hiding in marshes is foul business."

So saying, he laid aside his sword, and wading out shoulder-deep into the blue water, went about his ablutions. When he emerged, his clean-cut bronze limbs shone, his streaming black mane was no longer matted. His blue eyes, though they smoldered with unquenchable fire, were no longer murky or bloodshot. But the tigerish suppleness of limb and the dangerous aspect of feature were not altered.

Strapping on his sword once more, he motioned the girl to follow him, and they left the shore, passing under the leafy arches of the great branches. Underfoot lay a short green sward which cushioned their tread. Between the trunks of the trees they caught glimpses of faery-like vistas.

Presently Conan grunted in pleasure at the sight of golden and russet globes hanging in clusters among the leaves. Indicating that the girl should seat herself on a fallen tree, he filled her lap with the exotic delicacies, and then himself fell to with unconcealed gusto.

"Ishtar!" said he, between mouthfuls. "Since Ilbars I have lived on rats, and roots I dug out of the stinking mud. This is sweet to the palate, though not very filling. Still, it will serve if we eat enough."

Olivia was too busy to reply. The sharp edge of the Cimmerian's hunger blunted, he began to gaze at his fair companion with more interest than previously, noting the lustrous clusters of her dark hair, the peach-bloom tints of her dainty skin, and the rounded contours of her lithe figure which the scanty silk tunic displayed to full advantage.

Finishing her meal, the object of his scrutiny looked up, and meeting his burning, slit-eyed gaze, she changed color and the remnants of the fruit slipped from her fingers.

Without comment, he indicated with a gesture that they should continue their explorations, and rising, she followed him out of the trees and into a glade, the farther end of which was bounded by a dense thicket. As they stepped into the open there was a ripping crash in this thicket, and Conan, bounding aside and carrying the girl with him, narrowly saved them from something that rushed through the air and struck a tree-trunk with a thunderous impact.

WHIPPING out his sword, Conan bounded across the glade and plunged into the thicket. Silence ensued, while Olivia crouched on the sward, terrified and bewildered. Presently Conan emerged, a puzzled scowl on his face.

"Nothing in that thicket," he growled. "But there was something——"

He studied the missile that had so narrowly missed them, and grunted incredulously, as if unable to credit his own senses. It was a huge block of greenish stone which lay on the sward at the foot of the tree, whose wood its impact had splintered.

"A strange stone to find on an uninhabited island," growled Conan.

Olivia's lovely eyes dilated in wonder. The stone was a symmetrical block, indisputably cut and shaped by human hands. And it was astonishingly massive. The Cimmerian grasped it with both hands, and with legs braced and the muscles standing out on his arms and back in straining knots, he heaved it above his head and cast it from him, exerting every ounce of nerve and sinew. It fell a few feet in front of him. Conan swore.

"No man living could throw that rock across this glade. It's a task for siege engines. Yet here there are no mangonels or ballistas."

"Perhaps it was thrown by some such engine from afar," she suggested.

He shook his head. "It didn't fall from above. It came from yonder thicket. See how the twigs are broken? It was thrown as a man might throw a pebble. But who? what? Come!"

She hesitantly followed him into the thicket. Inside the outer ring of leafy brush, the undergrowth was less dense. Utter silence brooded over all. The springy sward gave no sign of footprint. Yet from this mysterious thicket had hurtled that boulder, swift and deadly. Conan bent closer to the sward, where the grass was crushed down here and there. He shook his head angrily. Even to his keen eyes it gave no clue as to what had stood or trodden there. His gaze roved to the green roof above their heads,

a solid ceiling of thick leaves and interwoven arches. And he froze suddenly.

Then rising, sword in hand, he began to back away, thrusting Olivia behind him.

"Out of here, quick!" he urged in a whisper that congealed the girl's blood.

"What is it? What do you see?"

"Nothing," he answered guardedly, not halting his wary retreat.

"But what is it, then? What lurks in this thicket?"

"Death!" he answered, his gaze still fixed on the brooding jade arches that shut out the sky.

Once out of the thicket, he took her hand and led her swiftly through the thinning trees, until they mounted a grassy slope, sparsely treed, and emerged upon a low plateau, where the grass grew taller and the trees were few and scattered. And in the midst of that plateau rose a long broad structure of crumbling greenish stone.

They gazed in wonder. No legends named such a building on any island of Vilayet. They approached it warily, seeing that moss and lichen crawled over the stones, and the broken roof gaped to the sky. On all sides lay bits and shards of masonry, half hidden in the waving grass, giving the impression that once many buildings rose there, perhaps a whole town. But now only the long hall-like structure rose against the sky, and its walls leaned drunkenly among the crawling vines.

Whatever doors had once guarded its portals had long rotted away. Conan and his companion stood in the broad entrance and stared inside. Sunlight streamed in through gaps in the walls and roof, making the interior a dim weave of light and shadow. Grasping his sword firmly, Conan entered, with the slouching gait of a hunting panther, sunken

head and noiseless feet. Olivia tiptoed after him.

ONCE within, Conan grunted in surprise, and Olivia stifled a scream.

"Look! Oh, look!"

"I see," he answered. "Nothing to fear. They are statues."

"But how life-like—and how evil!" she whispered, drawing close to him.

They stood in a great hall, whose floor was of polished stone, littered with dust and broken stones, which had fallen from the ceiling. Vines, growing between the stones, masked the apertures. The lofty roof, flat and undomed, was upheld by thick columns, marching in rows down the sides of the walls. And in each space between these columns stood a strange figure.

They were statues, apparently of iron, black and shining as if continually polished. They were life-size, depicting tall, lithely powerful men, with cruel hawk-like faces. They were naked, and every swell, depression and contour of joint and sinew was represented with incredible realism. But the most life-like feature was their proud, intolerant faces. These features were not cast in the same mold. Each face possessed its own individual characteristics, though there was a tribal likeness between them all. There was none of the monotonous uniformity of decorative art, in the faces at least.

"They seem to be listening—and waiting!" whispered the girl uneasily.

Conan rang his hilt against one of the images.

"Iron," he pronounced. "But Crom! in what molds were they cast?"

He shook his head and shrugged his massive shoulders in puzzlement.

Olivia glanced timidly about the great silent hall. Only the ivy-grown stones, the tendril-clasped pillars, with the dark

figures brooding between them, met her gaze. She shifted uneasily and wished to be gone, but the images held a strange fascination for her companion. He examined them in detail, and barbarian-like, tried to break off their limbs. But their material resisted his best efforts. He could neither disfigure nor dislodge from its niche a single image. At last he desisted, swearing in his wonder.

"What manner of men were these copied from?" he inquired of the world at large. "These figures are black, yet they are not like negroes. I have never seen their like."

"Let us go into the sunlight," urged Olivia, and he nodded, with a baffled glance at the brooding shapes along the walls.

So they passed out of the dusky hall into the clear blaze of the summer sun. She was surprised to note its position in the sky; they had spent more time in the ruins than she had guessed.

"Let us take to the boat again," she suggested. "I am afraid here. It is a strange evil place. We do not know when we may be attacked by whatever cast the rock."

"I think we're safe as long as we're not under the trees," he answered. "Come."

The plateau, whose sides fell away toward the wooded shores on the east, west, and south, sloped upward toward the north to abut on a tangle of rocky cliffs, the highest point of the island. Thither Conan took his way, suiting his long stride to his companion's gait. From time to time his glance rested inscrutably upon her, and she was aware of it.

THEY reached the northern extremity of the plateau, and stood gazing up the steep pitch of the cliffs. Trees grew thickly along the rim of the plateau east

and west of the cliffs, and clung to the precipitous incline. Conan glanced at these trees suspiciously, but he began the ascent, helping his companion on the climb. The slope was not sheer, and was broken by ledges and boulders. The Cimmerian, born in a hill country, could have run up it like a cat, but Olivia found the going difficult. Again and again she felt herself lifted lightly off her feet and over some obstacle that would have taxed her strength to surmount, and her wonder grew at the sheer physical power of the man. She no longer found his touch repugnant. There was a promise of protection in his iron clasp.

At last they stood on the ultimate pinnacle, their hair stirring in the sea wind. From their feet the cliffs fell away sheerly three or four hundred feet to a narrow tangle of woodlands bordering the beach. Looking southward they saw the whole island lying like a great oval mirror, its bevelled edges sloping down swiftly into a rim of green, except where it broke in the pitch of the cliffs. As far as they could see, on all sides stretched the blue waters, still, placid, fading into dreamy hazes of distance.

"The sea is still," sighed Olivia. "Why should we not take up our journey again?"

Conan, poised like a bronze statue on the cliffs, pointed northward. Straining her eyes, Olivia saw a white fleck that seemed to hang suspended in the aching haze.

"What is it?"

"A sail."

"Hyrkanians?"

"Who can tell, at this distance?"

"They will anchor here — search the island for us!" she cried in quick panic.

"I doubt it. They come from the north, so they can not be searching for us. They may stop for some other rea-

son, in which case we'll have to hide as best we can. But I believe it's either a pirate, or an Hyrkanian galley returning from some northern raid. In the latter case they are not likely to anchor here. But we can't put to sea until they've gone out of sight, for they're coming from the direction in which we must go. Doubtless they'll pass the island tonight, and at dawn we can go on our way."

"Then we must spend the night here?" she shivered.

"It's safest."

"Then let us sleep here, on the crags," she urged.

He shook his head, glancing at the stunted trees, at the marching woods below, a green mass which seemed to send out tendrils straggling up the sides of the cliffs.

"Here are too many trees. We'll sleep in the ruins."

She cried out in protest.

"Nothing will harm you there," he soothed. "Whatever threw the stone at us did not follow us out of the woods. There was nothing to show that any wild thing lairs in the ruins. Besides, you are soft-skinned, and used to shelter and dainties. I could sleep naked in the snow and feel no discomfort, but the dew would give you cramps, were we to sleep in the open."

Olivia helplessly acquiesced, and they descended the cliffs, crossed the plateau and once more approached the gloomy, age-haunted ruins. By this time the sun was sinking below the plateau rim. They had found fruit in the trees near the cliffs, and these formed their supper, both food and drink.

The southern night swept down quickly, littering the dark blue sky with great white stars, and Conan entered the shadowy ruins, drawing the reluctant Olivia after him. She shivered at the sight of

those tense black shadows in their niches along the walls. In the darkness that the starlight only faintly touched, she could not make out their outlines; she could only sense their attitude of waiting—waiting as they had waited for untold centuries.

Conan had brought a great armful of tender branches, well-leafed. These he heaped to make a couch for her, and she lay upon it, with a curious sensation as of one lying down to sleep in a serpent's lair.

Whatever her forebodings, Conan did not share them. The Cimmerian sat down near her, his back against a pillar, his sword across his knees. His eyes gleamed like a panther's in the dusk.

"Sleep, girl," said he. "My slumber is light as a wolf's. Nothing can enter this hall without awaking me."

Olivia did not reply. From her bed of leaves she watched the immobile figure, indistinct in the soft darkness. How strange, to move in fellowship with a barbarian, to be cared for and protected by one of a race, tales of which had frightened her as a child! He came of a people bloody, grim and ferocious. His kinship to the wild was apparent in his every action; it burned in his smoldering eyes. Yet he had not harmed her, and her worst oppressor had been a man the world called civilized. As a delicious languor stole over her relaxing limbs and she sank into foamy billows of slumber, her last waking thought was a drowsy recollection of the firm touch of Conan's fingers on her soft flesh.

2

OLIVIA dreamed, and through her dreams crawled a suggestion of lurking evil, like a black serpent writhing through flower gardens. Her dreams were fragmentary and colorful, exotic

shards of a broken, unknown pattern, until they crystallized into a scene of horror and madness, etched against a background of cyclopean stones and pillars.

She saw a great hall, whose lofty ceiling was upheld by stone columns marching in even rows along the massive walls. Among these pillars fluttered great green and scarlet parrots, and the hall was thronged with black-skinned, hawk-faced warriors. They were not negroes. Neither they nor their garments nor weapons resembled anything of the world the dreamer knew.

They were pressing about one bound to a pillar: a slender white-skinned youth, with a cluster of golden curls about his alabaster brow. His beauty was not altogether human—like the dream of a god, chiseled out of living marble.

The black warriors laughed at him, jeered and taunted in a strange tongue. The lithe naked form writhed beneath their cruel hands. Blood trickled down the ivory thighs to spatter on the polished floor. The screams of the victim echoed through the hall; then lifting his head toward the ceiling and the skies beyond, he cried out a name in an awful voice. A dagger in an ebon hand cut short his cry, and the golden head rolled on the ivory breast.

As if in answer to that desperate cry, there was a rolling thunder as of celestial chariot-wheels, and a figure stood before the slayers, as if materialized out of empty air. The form was of a man, but no mortal man ever wore such an aspect of inhuman beauty. There was an unmistakable resemblance between him and the youth who drooped lifeless in his chains, but the alloy of humanity that softened the godliness of the youth was lacking in the features of the stranger, awful and immobile in their beauty.

The blacks shrank back before him,

their eyes slits of fire. Lifting a hand, he spoke, and his tones echoed through the silent halls in deep rich waves of sound. Like men in a trance the black warriors fell back until they were ranged along the walls in regular lines. Then from the stranger's chiseled lips rang a terrible invocation and command: "*Yag-koolan yok tha, xuthalla!*"

At the blast of that awful cry, the black figures stiffened and froze. Over their limbs crept a curious rigidity, an unnatural petrification. The stranger touched the limp body of the youth, and the chains fell away from it. He lifted the corpse in his arms; then ere he turned away, his tranquil gaze swept again over the silent rows of ebony figures, and he pointed to the moon, which gleamed in through the casements. And they understood, those tense, waiting statues that had been men. . . .

Olivia awoke, starting up on her couch of branches, a cold sweat beading her skin. Her heart pounded loud in the silence. She glanced wildly about. Conan slept against his pillar, his head fallen upon his massive breast. The silvery radiance of the late moon crept through the gaping roof, throwing long white lines along the dusty floor. She could see the images dimly, black, tense—waiting. Fighting down a rising hysteria, she saw the moonbeams rest lightly on the pillars and the shapes between.

What was that? A tremor among the shadows where the moonlight fell. A paralysis of horror gripped her, for where there should have been the immobility of death, there was movement: a slow twitching, a flexing and writhing of ebon limbs—an awful scream burst from her lips as she broke the bonds that held her mute and motionless. At her shriek Conan shot erect, teeth gleaming, sword lifted.

"The statues! The statues!—oh my God, the statues are coming to life!"

And with the cry she sprang through a crevice in the wall, burst madly through the hindering vines, and ran, ran, ran—blind, screaming, witless—until a grasp on her arm brought her up short and she shrieked and fought against the arms that caught her, until a familiar voice penetrated the mists of her terror, and she saw Conan's face, a mask of bewilderment in the moonlight.

"What in Crom's name, girl? Did you have a nightmare?" His voice sounded strange and far away. With a sobbing gasp she threw her arms about his thick neck and clung to him convulsively, crying in panting catches.

"Where are they? Did they follow us?"

"Nobody followed us," he answered.

She sat up, still clinging to him, and looked fearfully about. Her blind flight had carried her to the southern edge of the plateau. Just below them was the slope, its foot masked in the thick shadows of the woods. Behind them she saw the ruins looming in the high-swinging moon.

"Did you not see them?—the statues, moving, lifting their hands, their eyes glaring in the shadows?"

"I saw nothing," answered the barbarian uneasily. "I slept more soundly than usual, because it has been so long since I have slumbered the night through; yet I don't think anything could have entered the hall without waking me."

"Nothing entered," a laugh of hysteria escaped her. "It was something there already. Ah, Mitra, we lay down to sleep among them, like sheep making their bed in the shambles!"

"What are you talking about?" he demanded. "I woke at your cry, but before

I had time to look about me, I saw you rush out through the crack in the wall. I pursued you, lest you come to harm. I thought you had a nightmare."

"So I did!" she shivered. "But the reality was more grisly than the dream. Listen!" And she narrated all that she had dreamed and thought to see.

Conan listened attentively. The natural skepticism of the sophisticated man was not his. His mythology contained ghouls, goblins, and necromancers. After she had finished, he sat silent, absently toying with his sword.

"The youth they tortured was like the tall man who came?" he asked at last.

"As like as son to father," she answered, and hesitantly: "If the mind could conceive of the offspring of a union of divinity with humanity, it would picture that youth. The gods of old times mated sometimes with mortal women, our legends tell us."

"What gods?" he muttered.

"The nameless, forgotten ones. Who knows? They have gone back into the still waters of the lakes, the quiet hearts of the hills, the gulfs beyond the stars. Gods are no more stable than men."

"But if these shapes were men, blasted into iron images by some god or devil, how can they come to life?"

"There is witchcraft in the moon," she shuddered. "He pointed at the moon; while the moon shines on them, they live. So I believe."

"But we were not pursued," muttered Conan, glancing toward the brooding ruins. "You might have dreamed they moved. I am of a mind to return and see."

"No, no!" she cried, clutching him desperately. "Perhaps the spell upon them holds them in the hall. Do not go back! They will rend you limb from limb! Oh, Conan, let us go into our boat and flee

this awful island! Surely the Hyrkanian ship has passed us now! Let us go!"

SO FRANTIC was her pleading that Conan was impressed. His curiosity in regard to the images was balanced by his superstition. Foes of flesh and blood he did not fear, however great the odds, but any hint of the supernatural roused all the dim monstrous instincts of fear that are the heritage of the barbarian.

He took the girl's hand and they went down the slope and plunged into the dense woods, where the leaves whispered, and nameless night-birds murmured drowsily. Under the trees the shadows clustered thick, and Conan swerved to avoid the denser patches. His eyes roved continuously from side to side, and often flitted into the branches above them. He went quickly yet warily, his arm girdling the girl's waist so strongly that she felt as if she were being carried rather than guided. Neither spoke. The only sound was the girl's quick nervous panting, the rustle of her small feet in the grass. So they came through the trees to the edge of the water, shimmering like molten silver in the moonlight.

"We should have brought fruit for food," muttered Conan; "but doubtless we'll find other islands. As well leave now as later; it's but a few hours till dawn—"

His voice trailed away. The painter was still made fast to the looping root. But at the other end was only a smashed and shattered ruin, half submerged in the shallow water.

A stifled cry escaped Olivia. Conan wheeled and faced the dense shadows, a crouching image of menace. The noise of the night-birds was suddenly silent. A brooding stillness reigned over the woods. No breeze moved the branches, yet somewhere the leaves stirred faintly.

Quick as a great cat Conan caught up Olivia and ran. Through the shadows he raced like a phantom, while somewhere above and behind them sounded a curious rushing among the leaves, that implacably drew closer and closer. Then the moonlight burst full upon their faces, and they were speeding up the slope of the plateau.

At the crest Conan laid Olivia down, and turned to glare back at the gulf of shadows they had just quitted. The leaves shook in a sudden breeze; that was all. He shook his mane with an angry growl. Olivia crept to his feet like a frightened child. Her eyes looked up at him, dark wells of horror.

"What are we to do, Conan?" she whispered.

He looked at the ruins, stared again into the woods below.

"We'll go to the cliffs," he decided, lifting her to her feet. "Tomorrow I'll make a raft, and we'll trust our luck to the sea again."

"It was not—not *they* that destroyed our boat?" It was half question, half assertion.

He shook his head, grimly taciturn.

Every step of the way across that moon-haunted plateau was a sweating terror for Olivia, but no black shapes stole subtly from the looming ruins, and at last they reached the foot of the crags, which rose stark and gloomily majestic above them. There Conan halted in some uncertainty, at last selecting a place sheltered by a broad ledge, nowhere near any trees.

"Lie down and sleep if you can, Olivia," he said. "I'll keep watch."

But no sleep came to Olivia, and she lay watching the distant ruins and the wooded rim until the stars paled, the east whitened, and dawn in rose and gold

struck fire from the dew on the grass-blades.

She rose stiffly, her mind reverting to all the happenings of the night. In the morning light some of its terrors seemed like figments of an overwrought imagination. Conan strode over to her, and his words electrified her.

"Just before dawn I heard the creak of timbers and the rasp and clack of cordage and oars. A ship has put in and anchored at the beach not far away—probably the ship whose sail we saw yesterday. We'll go up the cliffs and spy on her."

Up they went, and lying on their bellies among the boulders, saw a painted mast jutting up beyond the trees to the west.

"An Hyrkanian craft, from the cut of her rigging," muttered Conan. "I wonder if the crew——"

A distant medley of voices reached their ears, and creeping to the southern edge of the cliffs, they saw a motley horde emerge from the fringe of trees along the western rim of the plateau, and stand there a space in debate. There was much flourishing of arms, brandishing of swords, and loud rough argument. Then the whole band started across the plateau toward the ruins, at a slant that would take them close by the foot of the cliffs.

"Pirates!" whispered Conan, a grim smile on his thin lips. "It's an Hyrkanian galley they've captured. Here—crawl among these rocks.

"Don't show yourself unless I call to you," he instructed, having secreted her to his satisfaction among a tangle of boulders along the crest of the cliffs. "I'm going to meet these dogs. If I succeed in my plan, all will be well, and we'll sail away with them. If I don't succeed—well, hide yourself in the rocks until

they're gone, for no devils on this island are as cruel as these sea-wolves."

And tearing himself from her reluctant grasp, he swung quickly down the cliffs.

LOOKING fearfully from her eyrie, Olivia saw the band had neared the foot of the cliffs. Even as she looked, Conan stepped out from among the boulders and faced them, sword in hand. They gave back with yells of menace and surprize; then halted uncertainly to glare at this figure which had appeared so suddenly from the rocks. There were some seventy of them, a wild horde made up of men from many nations: Kothians, Zamorians, Brythunians, Corinthians, Shemites. Their features reflected the wildness of their natures. Many bore the scars of the lash or the branding-iron. There were cropped ears, slit noses, gaping eye-sockets, stumps of wrists—marks of the hangman as well as scars of battle. Most of them were half naked, but the garments they wore were fine; gold-braided jackets, satin girdles, silken breeches, tattered, stained with tar and blood, vied with pieces of silver-chased armor. Jewels glittered in nose-rings and ear-rings, and in the hilts of their daggers.

Over against this bizarre mob stood the tall Cimmerian in strong contrast with his hard bronzed limbs and clean-cut vital features.

"Who are you?" they roared.

"Conan the Cimmerian!" his voice was like the deep challenge of a lion. "One of the Free Companions. I mean to try my luck with the Red Brotherhood. Who's your chief?"

"I, by Ishtar!" bellowed a bull-like voice, as a huge figure swaggered forward: a giant, naked to the waist, where his capacious belly was girdled by a wide

sash that upheld voluminous silken pantaloons. His head was shaven except for a scalp-lock, his mustaches dropped over a rat-trap mouth. Green Shemitish slippers with upturned toes were on his feet, a long straight sword in his hand.

Conan stared and glared.

"Sergius of Khrasha, by Crom!"

"Aye, by Ishtar!" boomed the giant, his small black eyes glittering with hate. "Did you think I had forgot? Ha! Sergius never forgets an enemy. Now I'll hang you up by the heels and skin you alive. At him, lads!"

"Aye, send your dogs at me, big-belly," sneered Conan with bitter scorn. "You were always a coward, you Kothic cur."

"Coward! To me?" The broad face turned black with passion. "On guard, you northern dog! I'll cut out your heart!"

In an instant the pirates had formed a circle about the rivals, their eyes blazing, their breath sucking between their teeth in bloodthirsty enjoyment. High up among the crags Olivia watched, sinking her nails into her palms in her painful excitement.

Without formality the combatants engaged, Sergius coming in with a rush, quick on his feet as a giant cat, for all his bulk. Curses hissed between his clenched teeth as he lustily swung and parried. Conan fought in silence, his eyes slits of blue bale-fire.

The Kothian ceased his oaths to save his breath. The only sounds were the quick scuff of feet on the sward, the panting of the pirate, the ring and clash of steel. The swords flashed like white fire in the early sun, wheeling and circling. They seemed to recoil from each other's contact, then leap together again instantly. Sergius was giving back; only his superlative skill had saved him thus

far from the blinding speed of the Cimmerian's onslaught. A louder clash of steel, a sliding rasp, a choking cry—from the pirate horde a fierce yell split the morning as Conan's sword plunged through their captain's massive body. The point quivered an instant from between Sergius' shoulders, a hand's breadth of white fire in the sunlight; then the Cimmerian wrenched back his steel and the pirate chief fell heavily, face down, and lay in a widening pool of blood, his broad hands twitching for an instant.

Conan wheeled toward the gaping corsairs.

"Well, you dogs!" he roared, "I've sent your chief to hell—what says the law of the Red Brotherhood?"

Before any could answer, a rat-faced Brythunian, standing behind his fellows, whirled a sling swiftly and deadly. Straight as an arrow sped the stone to its mark, and Conan reeled and fell as a tall tree falls to the woodsman's ax. Up on the cliff Olivia caught at the boulders for support. The scene swam dizzily before her eyes; all she could see was the Cimmerian lying limply on the sward, blood oozing from his head.

The rat-faced one yelped in triumph and ran to stab the prostrate man, but a lean Corinthian thrust him back.

"What, Aratus, would you break the law of the Brotherhood, you dog?"

"No law is broken," snarled the Brythunian.

"No law? Why, you dog, this man you have just struck down is by just rights our captain!"

"Nay!" shouted Aratus. "He was not of our band, but an outsider. He had not been admitted to fellowship. Slaying Sergius does not make him captain, as would have been the case had one of us killed him."

"But he wished to join us," retorted the Corinthian. "He said so."

At that a great clamor arose, some siding with Aratus, some with the Corinthian, whom they called Ivanos. Oaths flew thick, challenges were passed, hands fumbled at sword-hilts.

At last a Shemite spoke up above the clamor: "Why do you argue over a dead man?"

"He's not dead," answered the Corinthian, rising from beside the prostrate Cimmerian. "It was a glancing blow; he's only stunned."

At that the clamor rose anew, Aratus trying to get at the senseless man and Ivanos finally bestriding him, sword in hand, and defying all and sundry. Olivia sensed that it was not so much in defense of Conan that the Corinthian took his stand, but in opposition to Aratus. Evidently these men had been Sergius' lieutenants, and there was no love lost between them. After more arguments, it was decided to bind Conan and take him along with them, his fate to be voted on later.

The Cimmerian, who was beginning to regain consciousness, was bound with leather girdles, and then four pirates lifted him, and with many complaints and curses, carried him along with the band, which took up its journey across the plateau once more. The body of Sergius was left where it had fallen, a sprawling, unlovely shape on the sun-washed sward.

UP AMONG the rocks Olivia lay stunned by the disaster. She was incapable of speech or action, and could only lie there and stare with horrified eyes as the brutal horde dragged her protector away.

How long she lay there, she did not know. Across the plateau she saw the pirates reach the ruins and enter, drag-

ging their captive. She saw them swarming in and out of the doors and crevices, prodding into the heaps of debris, and clambering about the walls. After awhile a score of them came back across the plateau and vanished among the trees on the western rim, dragging the body of Sergius after them, presumably to cast into the sea. About the ruins the others were cutting down trees and securing material for a fire. Olivia heard their shouts, unintelligible in the distance, and she heard the voices of those who had gone into the woods, echoing among the trees. Presently they came back into sight, bearing casks of liquor and leathern sacks of food. They headed for the ruins, cursing lustily under their burdens.

Of all this Olivia was but mechanically cognizant. Her overwrought brain was almost ready to collapse. Left alone and unprotected, she realized how much the protection of the Cimmerian had meant to her. There intruded vaguely a wonderment at the mad pranks of Fate, that could make the daughter of a king the companion of a red-handed barbarian. With it came a revulsion toward her own kind. Her father, and Shah Amurath, they were civilized men. And from them she had had only suffering. She had never encountered any civilized man who treated her with kindness unless there were an ulterior motive behind his actions. Conan had shielded her, protected her, and—so far—demanded nothing in return. Laying her head in her rounded arms she wept, until distant shouts of ribald revelry roused her to her own danger.

She glanced from the dark ruins about which the fantastic figures, small in the distance, weaved and staggered, to the dusky depths of the green forest. Even if her terrors in the ruins the night before had been only dreams, the menace that

lurked in those green leafy depths below was no figment of nightmare. Were Conan slain or carried away captive, her only choice would lie between giving herself up to the human wolves of the sea, or remaining alone on that devil-haunted island.

As the full horror of her situation swept over her, she fell forward in a swoon.

3

THE sun was hanging low when Olivia regained her senses. A faint wind wafted to her ears distant shouts and snatches of ribald song. Rising cautiously, she looked out across the plateau. She saw the pirates clustered about a great fire outside the ruins, and her heart leaped as a group emerged from the interior dragging some object she knew was Conan. They propped him against the wall, still evidently bound fast, and there ensued a long discussion, with much brandishing of weapons. At last they dragged him back into the hall, and took up anew the business of ale-guzzling. Olivia sighed; at least she knew that the Cimmerian still lived. Fresh determination steeled her. As soon as night fell, she would steal to those grim ruins and free him or be taken herself in the attempt. And she knew it was not selfish interest alone which prompted her decision.

With this in mind she ventured to creep from her refuge to pluck and eat nuts which grew sparsely near at hand. She had not eaten since the day before. It was while so occupied that she was troubled by a sensation of being watched. She scanned the rocks nervously, then, with a shuddering suspicion, crept to the north edge of the cliff and gazed down into the waving green mass below; already dusky with the sunset. She saw

nothing; it was impossible that she could be seen, when not on the cliff's edge, by anything lurking in those woods. Yet she distinctly felt the glare of hidden eyes, and felt that *something* animate and sentient was aware of her presence and her hiding-place.

Stealing back to her rocky eyrie, she lay watching the distant ruins until the dusk of night masked them, and she marked their position by the flickering flames about which black figures leaped and cavorted groggily.

Then she rose. It was time to make her attempt. But first she stole back to the northern edge of the cliffs, and looked down into the woods that bordered the beach. And as she strained her eyes in the dim starlight, she stiffened, and an icy hand touched her heart.

Far below her something moved. It was as if a black shadow detached itself from the gulf of shadows below her. It moved slowly up the sheer face of the cliff—a vague bulk, shapeless in the semi-darkness. Panic caught Olivia by the throat, and she struggled with the scream that tugged at her lips. Turning, she fled down the southern slope.

That flight down the shadowed cliffs was a nightmare in which she slid and scrambled, catching at jagged rocks with cold fingers. As she tore her tender skin and bruised her soft limbs on the rugged boulders over which Conan had so lightly lifted her, she realized again her dependence on the iron-thewed barbarian. But this thought was but one in a fluttering maelstrom of dizzy fright.

The descent seemed endless, but at last her feet struck the grassy levels, and in a very frenzy of eagerness she sped away toward the fire that burned like the red heart of night. Behind her, as she fled, she heard a shower of stones rattle down the steep slope, and the sound lent wings

to her heels. What grisly climber dislodged those stones she dared not try to think.

Strenuous physical action dissipated her blind terror somewhat and before she had reached the ruins, her mind was clear, her reasoning faculties alert, though her limbs trembled from her efforts.

She dropped to the sward and wriggled along on her belly until, from behind a small tree that had escaped the axes of the pirates, she watched her enemies. They had completed their supper, but were still drinking, dipping pewter mugs or jewelled goblets into the broken heads of the wine-casks. Some were already snoring drunkenly on the grass, while others had staggered into the ruins. Of Conan she saw nothing. She lay there, while the dew formed on the grass about her and the leaves overhead, and the men about the fire cursed, gambled and argued. There were only a few about the fire; most of them had gone into the ruins to sleep.

She lay watching them, her nerves taut with the strain of waiting, the flesh crawling between her shoulders at the thought of what might be watching her in turn—of what might be stealing up behind her. Time dragged on leaden feet. One by one the revellers sank down in drunken slumber, until all were stretched senseless beside the dying fire.

Olivia hesitated—then was galvanized by a distant glow rising through the trees. The moon was rising!

With a gasp she rose and hurried toward the ruins. Her flesh crawled as she tiptoed among the drunken shapes that sprawled beside the gaping portal. Inside were many more; they shifted and mumbled in their besotted dreams, but none awakened as she glided among them. A sob of joy rose to her lips as she saw Conan. The Cimmerian was

wide awake, bound upright to a pillar, his eyes gleaming in the faint reflection of the waning fire outside.

PICKING her way among the sleepers, she approached him. Lightly as she had come, he had heard her; had seen her when first framed in the portal. A faint grin touched his hard lips.

She reached him and clung to him an instant. He felt the quick beating of her heart against his breast. Through a broad crevice in the wall stole a beam of moonlight, and the air was instantly supercharged with subtle tension. Conan felt it and stiffened. Olivia felt it and gasped. The sleepers snored on. Bending quickly, she drew a dagger from its senseless owner's belt, and set to work on Conan's bonds. They were sail cords, thick and heavy, and tied with the craft of a sailor. She toiled desperately, while the tide of moonlight crept slowly across the floor toward the feet of the crouching black figures between the pillars.

Her breath came in gasps; Conan's wrists were free, but his elbows and legs were still bound fast. She glanced fleetingly at the figures along the walls—waiting, waiting. They seemed to watch her with the awful patience of the undead. The drunkards beneath her feet began to stir and groan in their sleep. The moonlight crept down the hall, touching the black feet. The cords fell from Conan's arms, and taking the dagger from her, he ripped the bonds from his legs with a single quick slash. He stepped out from the pillar, flexing his limbs, stoically enduring the agony of returning circulation. Olivia crouched against him, shaking like a leaf. Was it some trick of the moonlight that touched the eyes of the black figures with fire, so that they glimmered redly in the shadows?

Conan moved with the abruptness of a jungle cat. Catching up his sword from where it lay in a stack of weapons near by, he lifted Olivia lightly from her feet and glided through an opening that gaped in the ivy-grown wall.

No word passed between them. Lifting her in his arms he set off swiftly across the moon-bathed sward. Her arms about his iron neck, the Ophirean closed her eyes, cradling her dark curly head against his massive shoulder. A delicious sense of security stole over her.

In spite of his burden, the Cimmerian crossed the plateau swiftly, and Olivia, opening her eyes, saw that they were passing under the shadow of the cliffs.

"Something climbed the cliffs," she whispered. "I heard it scrambling behind me as I came down."

"We'll have to chance it," he grunted.

"I am not afraid—now," she sighed.

"You were not afraid when you came to free me, either," he answered. "Crom, what a day it has been! Such haggling and wrangling I never heard. I'm nearly deaf. Aratus wished to cut out my heart, and Ivanos refused, to spite Aratus, whom he hates. All day long they snarled and spat at one another, and the crew quickly grew too drunk to vote either way——"

He halted suddenly, an image of bronze in the moonlight. With a quick gesture he tossed the girl lightly to one side and behind him. Rising to her knees on the soft sward, she screamed at what she saw.

Out of the shadows of the cliffs moved a monstrous shambling bulk—an anthropomorphic horror, a grotesque travesty of creation.

IN GENERAL outline it was not unlike a man. But its face, limned in the bright moonlight, was bestial, with close-set ears, flaring nostrils, and a great flab-

by-lipped mouth in which gleamed white tusk-like fangs. It was covered with shaggy grayish hair, shot with silver which shone in the moonlight, and its great misshapen paws hung nearly to the earth. Its bulk was tremendous; as it stood on its short bowed legs, its bullet-head rose above that of the man who faced it; the sweep of the hairy breast and giant shoulders was breath-taking; the huge arms were like knotted trees.

The moonlight scene swam, to Olivia's sight. This, then, was the end of the trail—for what human being could withstand the fury of that hairy mountain of thews and ferocity? Yet as she stared in wide-eyed horror at the bronzed figure facing the monster, she sensed a kinship in the antagonists that was almost appalling. This was less a struggle between man and beast than a conflict between two creatures of the wild, equally merciless and ferocious. With a flash of white tusks, the monster charged.

The mighty arms spread wide as the beast plunged, stupefyingly quick for all his vast bulk and stunted legs.

Conan's action was a blur of speed. Olivia's eye could not follow. She only saw that he evaded that deadly grasp, and his sword, flashing like a jet of white lightning, sheared through one of those massive arms between shoulder and elbow. A great spout of blood deluged the sward as the severed member fell, twitching horribly, but even as the sword bit through, the other malformed hand locked in Conan's black mane.

Only the iron neck-muscles of the Cimmerian saved him from a broken neck at that instant. His left hand darted out to clamp on the beast's squat throat, his left knee was jammed hard against the brute's hairy belly. Then began a terrific struggle, which lasted only seconds, but which seemed like ages to the paralyzed girl.

The ape maintained his grasp in Conan's hair, dragging him toward the tusks that glistened in the moonlight. The Cimmerian resisted this effort, with his left arm rigid as iron, while the sword in his right hand, wielded like a butcher-knife, sank again and again into the groin, breast and belly of his captor. The beast took its punishment in awful silence, apparently unweakened by the blood that gushed from its ghastly wounds. Swiftly the terrible strength of the anthropoid overcame the leverage of braced arm and knee. Inexorably Conan's arm bent under the strain; nearer and nearer he was drawn to the slavering jaws that gaped for his life. Now the blazing eyes of the barbarian glared into the bloodshot eyes of the ape. But as Conan tugged vainly at his sword, wedged deep in the hairy body, the frothing jaws snapped spasmodically shut, an inch from the Cimmerian's face, and he was hurled to the sward by the dying convulsions of the monster.

Olivia, half fainting, saw the ape heaving, thrashing and writhing, gripping, man-like, the hilt that jutted from its body. A sickening instant of this, then the great bulk quivered and lay still.

Conan rose and limped over to the corpse. The Cimmerian breathed heavily, and walked like a man whose joints and muscles have been wrenched and twisted almost to their limit of endurance. He felt his bloody scalp and swore at the sight of the long black red-stained strands still grasped in the monster's shaggy hand.

"Crom!" he panted. "I feel as if I'd been racked! I'd rather fight a dozen men. Another instant and he'd have bitten off my head. Blast him, he's torn a handful of my hair out by the roots."

Gripping his hilt with both hands he tugged and worked it free. Olivia stole

close to clasp his arm and stare down wide-eyed at the sprawling monster.

"What—what is it?" she whispered.

"A gray man-ape," he grunted. "Dumb, and man-eating. They dwell in the hills that border the eastern shore of this sea. How this one got to this island, I can't say. Maybe he floated here on driftwood, blown out from the mainland in a storm."

"And it was he that threw the stone?"

"Yes; I suspected what it was when we stood in the thicket and I saw the boughs bending over our heads. These creatures always lurk in the deepest woods they can find, and seldom emerge. What brought him into the open, I can't say, but it was lucky for us; I'd have had no chance with him among the trees."

"It followed me," she shivered. "I saw it climbing the cliffs."

"And following his instinct, he lurked in the shadow of the cliff, instead of following you out across the plateau. His kind are creatures of darkness and the silent places, haters of the sun and moon."

"Do you suppose there are others?"

"No, else the pirates had been attacked when they went through the woods. The gray ape is wary, for all his strength, as shown by his hesitancy in falling upon us in the thicket. His lust for you must have been great, to have driven him to attack us finally in the open. What——"

He started and wheeled back toward the way they had come. The night had been split by an awful scream. It came from the ruins.

Instantly there followed a mad medley of yells, shrieks, and cries of blasphemous agony. Though accompanied by a ringing of steel, the sounds were of massacre rather than battle.

Conan stood frozen, the girl clinging to him in a frenzy of terror. The clamor

rose to a crescendo of madness, and then the Cimmerian turned and went swiftly toward the rim of the plateau, with its fringe of moon-limned trees. Olivia's legs were trembling so that she could not walk; so he carried her, and her heart calmed its frantic pounding as she nestled into his cradling arms.

They passed under the shadowy forest, but the clusters of blackness held no terrors, the rifts of silver discovered no grisly shape. Night-birds murmured slumberously. The yells of slaughter dwindled behind them, masked in the distance to a confused jumble of sound. Somewhere a parrot called, like an eery echo: "*Yagkoolan yok tha, xuthalla!*" So they came to the tree-fringed water's edge and saw the galley lying at anchor, her sail shining white in the moonlight. Already the stars were paling for dawn.

4

IN THE ghastly whiteness of dawn a handful of tattered, blood-stained figures staggered through the trees and out on to the narrow beach. There were forty-four of them, and they were a cowed and demoralized band. With panting haste they plunged into the water and began to wade toward the galley, when a stern challenge brought them up standing.

Etched against the whitening sky they saw Conan the Cimmerian standing in the bows, sword in hand, his black mane tossing in the dawn wind.

"Stand!" he ordered. "Come no nearer. What would you have, dogs?"

"Let us come aboard!" croaked a hairy rogue, fingering a bloody stump of ear. "We'd be gone from this devil's island."

"The first man who tries to climb over the side, I'll split his skull," promised Conan.

They were forty-four to one, but he

held the whip-hand. The fight had been hammered out of them.

"Let us come aboard, good Conan," whined a red-sashed Zamorian, glancing fearfully over his shoulder at the silent woods. "We have been so mauled, bitten, scratched, and rended, and are so weary from fighting and running, that not one of us can lift a sword."

"Where is that dog Aratus?" demanded Conan.

"Dead, with the others! It was devils fell upon us! They were rending us to pieces before we could awake—a dozen good rovers died in their sleep. The ruins were full of flame-eyed shadows, with tearing fangs and sharp talons."

"Aye!" put in another corsair. "They were the demons of the isle, which took the forms of molten images, to befool us. Ishtar! we lay down to sleep among them. We are no cowards. We fought them as long as mortal man may strive against the powers of darkness. Then we broke away and left them tearing at the corpses like jackals. But surely they'll pursue us."

"Aye, let us come aboard!" clamored a lean Shemite. "Let us come in peace, or we must come sword in hand, and though we be so weary you will doubtless slay many of us, yet you can not prevail against us many."

"Then I'll knock a hole in the planks and sink her," answered Conan grimly. A frantic chorus of expostulation rose, which Conan silenced with a lion-like roar.

"Dogs! Must I aid my enemies? Shall I let you come aboard and cut out my heart?"

"Nay, nay!" they cried eagerly. "Friends—friends, Conan. We are thy comrades, lad! We be all lusty rogues together. We hate the king of Turan, not each other."

Their gaze hung on his brown frowning face.

"Then if I am one of the Brotherhood," he grunted, "the laws of the Trade apply to me; and since I killed your chief in fair fight, then I am your captain!"

There was no dissent. The pirates were too cowed and battered to have any thought except a desire to get away from that island of fear. Conan's gaze sought out the blood-stained figure of the Corinthian.

"How, Ivanos!" he challenged. "You took my part, once. Will you uphold my claims again?"

"Aye, by Mitra!" The pirate, sensing the trend of feeling, was eager to ingratiate himself with the Cimmerian. "He is right, lads; he is our lawful captain!"

A medley of acquiescence rose, lacking enthusiasm perhaps, but with sincerity accentuated by the feel of the silent woods behind them which might mask creeping ebony devils with red eyes and dripping talons.

"Swear by the hilt," Conan demanded.

Forty-four sword-hilts were lifted toward him, and forty-four voices blended in the corsair's oath of allegiance.

Conan grinned and sheathed his sword. "Come aboard, my bold swashbucklers, and take the oars."

He turned and lifted Olivia to her feet, from where she had crouched shielded by the gunwales.

"And what of me, sir?" she asked.

"What would you?" he countered, watching her narrowly.

"To go with you, wherever your path may lie!" she cried, throwing her white arms about his bronzed neck.

The pirates, clambering over the rail, gasped in amazement.

"To sail a road of blood and slaughter?" he questioned. "This keel will stain the blue waves crimson wherever it plows."

"Aye, to sail with you on blue seas or red," she answered passionately. "You are a barbarian, and I am an outcast, denied by my people. We are both pariahs, wanderers of the earth. Oh, take me with you!"

With a gusty laugh he lifted her to his fierce lips.

"I'll make you Queen of the Blue Sea! Cast off there, dogs! We'll scorch King Yildiz's pantaloons yet, by Crom!"



The Death of Malygris

By CLARK ASHTON SMITH

Even in death, the mighty wizard proved himself greater than his peers—a story of weird sorcery

AT THE hour of interlunar midnight, when lamps burned rarely and far apart in Susran, and slow-moving autumn clouds had muffled the stars, King Gadeiron sent forth into the sleeping city twelve of his trustiest mutes. Like shadows gliding through oblivion, they vanished upon their various ways; and each of them, returning presently to the darkened palace, led with him a shrouded figure no less discreet and silent than himself.

In this manner, groping along tortuous alleys, through blind cypress-caverns in the royal gardens, and down subterranean halls and steps, twelve of the most powerful sorcerers of Susran were brought together in a vault of oozing, death-gray granite, far beneath the foundations of the palace.

The entrance of the vault was guarded by earth-demons that obeyed the archsorcerer, Maranapion, who had long been the king's councillor. These demons would have torn limb from limb any who came unprepared to offer them a libation of fresh blood. The vault was lit dubiously by a single lamp, hollowed from a monstrous garnet, and fed with vipers' oil. Here Gadeiron, crownless, and wearing sackcloth dyed in sober purple, awaited the wizards on a seat of limestone wrought in the form of a sarcophagus. Maranapion stood at his right hand, immobile, and swathed to the mouth in the garments of the tomb. Before him was a tripod of orichalcum, rearing shoulder-high; and on the tripod, in a silver socket,

there reposed the enormous blue eye of a slain Cyclops, wherein the archimage was said to behold weird visions. On this eye, gleaming balefully under the garnet lamp, the gaze of Maranapion was fixed with death-like rigidity.

From these circumstances, the twelve sorcerers knew that the king had convened them only because of a matter supremely grave and secret. The hour and fashion of their summoning, the place of meeting, the terrible elemental guards, the mufti worn by Gadeiron—all were proof of a need for preternatural stealth and privity.

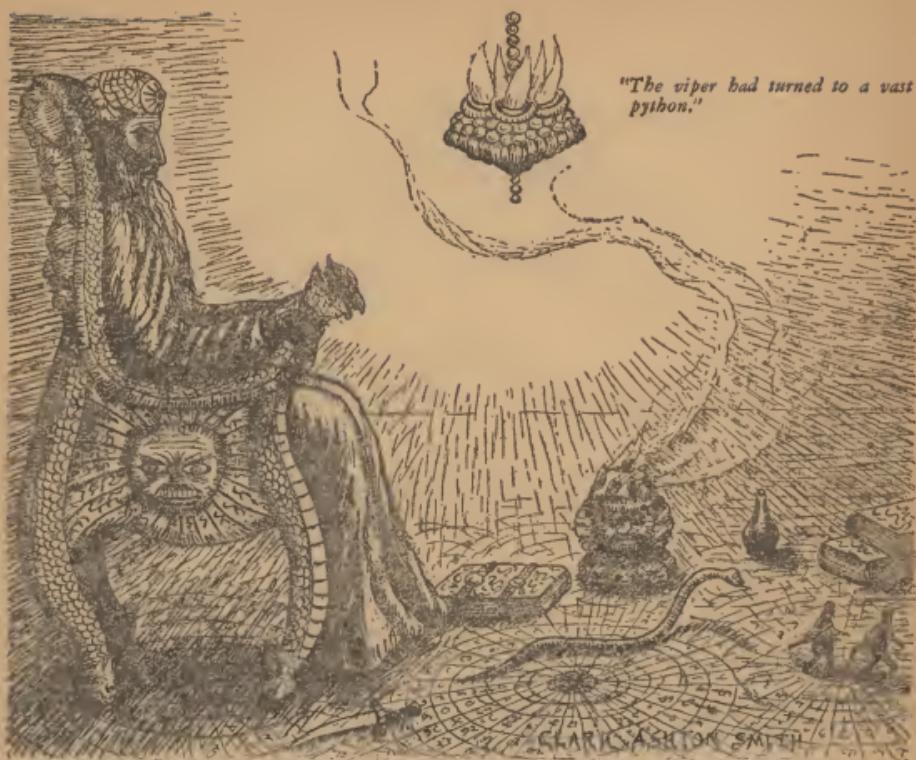
For awhile there was silence in the vault, and the twelve, bowing deferentially, waited the will of Gadeiron. Then, in a voice that was little more than a harsh whisper, the king spoke:

"What know ye of Malygris?"

Hearing that awful name, the sorcerers paled and trembled visibly; but, one by one, as if speaking by rote, several of the foremost made answer to Gadeiron's question.

"Malygris dwells in his black tower above Susran," said the first. "The night of his power is still heavy upon Poseidonis; and we others, moving in that night, are as shadows of a withered moon. He is overlord of all kings and sorcerers. Yea, even the triremes that fare to Tartessos, and the far-flown eagles of the sea, pass not beyond the black falling of his shadow."

"The demons of the five elements are his familiars," said the second. "The



gross eyes of common men have beheld them often, flying like birds about his tower, or crawling lizard-wise on the walls and pavements."

"Malygris sits in his high hall," avowed the third. "Unto him, tribute is borne at the full moon from all the cities of Poseidonis. He takes a tithe of the lading of every galley. He claims a share of the silver and incense, of the gold and ivory sacred to the temples. His wealth is beyond the opulence of the sunken kings of Atlantis . . . even those kings who were thy forefathers, O Gadeiron."

"Malygris is old as the moon," mumbled a fourth. "He will live for ever, armed against death with the dark magic of the moon. Death has become a slave in his citadel, toiling among other slaves, and striking only at the foes of Malygris."

"Much of this was true formerly," quoth the king, with a sinister hissing of his breath. "But now a certain doubt has arisen . . . for it may be that Malygris is dead."

A communicated shiver seemed to run about the assembly.

"Nay," said the sorcerer who had affirmed the immortality of Malygris. "For how can this thing have come to pass? The doors of his tower stood open today at sunset; and the priests of the ocean-god, bearing a gift of pearls and purple dyes, went in before Malygris, and found him sitting in his tall chair of the ivory of mastodons. He received them haughtily, without speaking, as is his wont; and his servants, who are half ape and half man, came in unbidden to carry away the tribute."

"This very night," said another, "I saw the stedfast lamps of the sable tower, burning above the city like the eyes of Taaran, god of Evil. The familiars have departed not from the tower as such beings depart at the dying of a wizard: for in that case, men would have heard their howling and lamentation in the dark."

"Aye," declared Gadeiron, "men have been befooled ere this. And Malygris was ever the master of illuding shows, of feints and beguilements. But there is one among us who discerns the truth. Maranapion, through the eye of the Cyclops, has looked on remote things and hidden places. Even now, he peers upon his ancient enemy, Malygris."

MARANAPION, shuddering a little beneath his shroud-like garments, seemed to return from his clairvoyant absorption. He raised from the tripod his eyes of luminous amber, whose pupils were black and impenetrable as jet.

"I have seen Malygris," he said, turning to the conclave. "Many times I have watched him thus, thinking to learn some secret of his close-hidden magic. I have spied upon him at noon, at evenfall, and through the drear, lampless vigils of midnight. And I have beheld him in the ashen dawn and the dawn of quickening fire. But always he sits in the great ivory chair, in the high hall of his tower, frowning as if with meditation. And his hands clutch always the basilisk-carven arms of the chair, and his eyes turn evermore, unshutting, unblinking, toward the orient window and the heavens beyond, where only high-risen stars and clouds go by.

"Thus have I beheld him for the space of a whole year and a month. And each day I have seen his monsters bring before him vessels filled with rare meat and

drink; and later they have taken away the vessels untouched. And never have I discerned the least movement of his lips, nor any turning or tremor of his body.

"For these reasons, I deem that Malygris is dead; but by virtue of his supremacy in evil and in art magical, he sits defying the worm, still undecayed and incorrupt. And his monsters and his familiar attend him still, deceived by the lying appearance of life; and his power, though now an empty fraud, is still dark and awful upon Poseidonis."

Again, following the slow-measured words of Maranapion, there was silence in the vault. A dark, furtive triumph smoldered in the face of Gadeiron, on whom the yoke of Malygris had lain heavily, irking his pride. Among the twelve sorcerers, there was none who wished well to Malygris, nor any who did not fear him; and they received the annunciation of his demise with dreadful, half-incredulous joy. Some there were who doubted, holding that Maranapion was mistaken; and in the faces of all, as in somber mirrors, their awe of the master was still reflected.

Maranapion, who had hated Malygris above all others, as the one warlock whose art and power excelled his own, stood aloof and inscrutable like a poising vulture.

It was King Gadeiron who broke the gravid silence.

"Not idly have I called ye to this crypt, O sorcerers of Susran: for a work remains to be done. Verily, shall the corpse of a dead necromancer tyrannize over us all? There is mystery here, and a need to move cautiously, for the duration of his necromancy is yet unverified and untested. But I have called ye together in order that the hardiest among ye may take council with Maranapion, and aid him in devising such wizardry as will now expose the fraud of Malygris, and evince his mor-

tality to all men, as well as to the fiends that follow him still, and the ministering monsters."

A babble of disputation rose, and they who were most doubtful of this matter, and feared to work against Malygris in any fashion, begged Gadeiron's leave to withdraw. In the end, there remained seven of the twelve. . . .

Swiftly, by dim and covert channels, on the day that followed, the death of Malygris was bruited throughout the isle Poseidonis. Many disbelieved the story, for the might of the wizard was a thing seared as with hot iron on the souls of them that had witnessed his thaumaturgies. However, it was recalled that during the past year few had beheld him face to face; and always he had seemed to ignore them, speaking not, and staring fixedly through the tower window, as if intent on far things that were veiled to others. During that time, he had called no man to his presence, and had sent forth no message, no oracle or decree; and they who had gone before him were mainly bearers of tribute and had followed a long-established custom.

When these matters became generally known, there were some who maintained that he sat thus in a long swoon of ecstasy or catalepsy, and would awaken therefrom in time. Others, however, held that he had died, and was able to preserve the deceitful aspect of life through a spell that endured after him. No man dared to enter the tall, sable tower; and still the shadow of the tower fell athwart Susran like the shadow of an evil gnomon moving on some disastrous dial; and still the umbrage of the power of Malygris lay stagnant as the tomb's night on the minds of men.

Now, among the five sorcerers who had begged Gadeiron's leave to depart, fearing to join their fellows in the

making of wizardry against Malygris, there were two that plucked heart a little afterward, when they heard from other sources a confirmation of the vision beheld by Maranapion through the Cyclops' eye.

These two were brothers, named Nygon and Fustules. Feeling a certain shame for their timidity, and desiring to rehabilitate themselves in the regard of the others, they conceived an audacious plan.

When night had again fallen upon the city, bringing no moon, but only obscure stars and the scud of sea-born clouds, Nygon and Fustules went forth through the darkened ways and came to the steep hill at the heart of Susran, whereon, in half-immemorial years, Malygris had established his grim citadel.

The hill was wooded with close-grown cypresses, whose foliage, even to the full sun, was black and somber as if tarnished by wizard fumes. Crouching on either hand, they leaned like misshapen spirits of the night above the stairs of adamant that gave access to the tower. Nygon and Fustules, mounting the stairs, cowered and trembled when the boughs swung menacingly toward them in violent gusts of wind. They felt the dripping of heavy sea-dews, blown in their faces like a spittle of demons. The wood, it seemed, was full of execrably sighing voices, and weird whimpers and little moanings as of imp-children astray from Satanic dams.

The lights of the tower burned through the waving boughs, and seemed to recede unapproachably as they climbed. More than once, the two regretted their temerity. But at length, without suffering palpable harm or hindrance, they neared the portals, which stood eternally open, pouring the effulgence of still, unflaring lamps on the windy darkness.

Though the plan they had conceived was nefarious, they deemed it best to

enter boldly. The purpose of their visit, if any should challenge or interrogate them, was the asking of an oracle from Malygris, who was famed throughout the isle as the most infallible of soothsayers.

Freshening momently from the sea beyond Susran, the wind clamored about the tower like an army of devils in flight from deep to deep, and the long mantles of the sorcerers were blown in their faces. But, entering the wide portals, they heard no longer the crying of the gale, and felt no more its pursuing rudeness. At a single step they passed into mausolean silence. Around them the lamplight fell unshaken on caryatids of black marble, on mosaics of precious gems, on fabulous metals and many-storied tapestries; and a tideless perfume weighed upon the air like a balsam of death.

They felt an involuntary awe, deeming the mortal stillness a thing that was hardly natural. But, seeing that the tower vestibule was unguarded by any of the creatures of Malygris, they were emboldened to go on and climb the marmorean stairs to the apartments above.

Everywhere, by the light of opulent lamps, they beheld inestimable and miraculous treasures. There were tables of ebony wrought with sorcerous runes of pearl and white coral; webs of silver and samite, cunningly pictured; caskets of electrum overflowing with talismanic jewels; tiny gods of jade and agate; and tall chryselephantine demons. Here was the loot of ages, lying heaped and mingled in utter negligence, without lock or ward, as if free for the taking of any casual thief.

Eyeing the riches about them with covetous wonder, the two sorcerers mounted slowly from room to room, unchallenged and unmolested, and came ultimately to that upper hall in which Malygris was wont to receive his visitors.

Here, as elsewhere, the portals stood open before them, and lamps burned as if in a trance of light. The lust of plunder was hot in their hearts. Made bolder still by the seeming desolation, and thinking now that the tower was uninhabited by any but the dead magician, they went in with little hesitancy.

Like the rooms below, the chamber was full of precious artifacts; and iron-bound volumes and brazen books of occult, tremendous necromancy, together with golden and earthen censers, and vials of unshatterable crystal, were strewn in weird confusion about the mosaic floor. At the very center there sat the old archimage in his chair of primeval ivory, peering with stark, immovable eyes at the night-black window.

Nygon and Fustules felt their awe return upon them, remembering too clearly now the thrice-baleful mastery that this man had wielded, and the demon lore he had known, and the spells he had wrought that were irrefragable by other wizards. The specters of these things rose up before them as if by a final necromancy. With down-dropped eyes and humble mien, they went forward, bowing reverentially. Then, speaking aloud, in accordance with their predetermined plan, Fustules requested an oracle of their fortunes from Malygris.

THERE was no answer, and lifting their eyes, the brothers were greatly reassured by the aspect of the seated ancient. Death alone could have set the grayish pallor on the brow, could have locked the lips in a rigor as of fast-frozen clay. The eyes were like cavern-shadowed ice, holding no other light than a vague reflection of the lamps. Under the beard that was half silver, half sable, the cheeks had already fallen in as with beginning decay, showing the harsh outlines of the

skull. The gray and hideously shrunken hands, whereon the eyes of enchanted beryls and rubies burned, were clenched inflexibly on the chair-arms, which had the form of arching basilisks.

"Verily," murmured Nygon, "there is naught here to frighten or dismay us. Behold, it is only the lich of an old man after all, and one that has cheated the worm of his due provender overlong."

"Aye," said Fustules. "But this man, in his time, was the greatest of all necromancers. Even the ring on his little finger is a sovereign talisman. The balas-ruby of the thumb-ring of his right hand will conjure demons from out the deep. In the volumes that lie about the chamber, there are secrets of perished gods and the mysteries of planets immemorial. In the vials, there are sirups that give strange visions, and philtres that can revive the dead. Among these things, it is ours to choose freely."

Nygon, eyeing the gems greedily, selected a ring that encircled the right forefinger with the sixfold coils of a serpent of orichalcum, bearing in its mouth a beryl shaped like a griffin's egg. Vainly, however, he tried to loosen the finger from its rigid clutch on the chair-arm, to permit the removal of the ring. Muttering impatiently, he drew a knife from his girdle and prepared to hew away the finger. In the meanwhile, Fustules had drawn his own knife as a preliminary before approaching the other hand.

"Is thy heart firm within thee, brother?" he inquired in a sort of sibilant whisper. "If so, there is even more to be gained than these talismanic rings. It is well known that a wizard who attains to such supremacy as Malygris, undergoes by virtue thereof a complete bodily transformation, turning his flesh into elements more subtle than those of common flesh. And whoso eats of his flesh even so much as a

tiny morsel, will share thereafter in the powers owned by the wizard."

Nygon nodded as he bent above the chosen finger. "This, too, was in my thought," he answered.

Before he or Fustules could begin their ghoulish attack, they were startled by a venomous hissing that appeared to emanate from the bosom of Malygris. They drew back in amazement and consternation, while a small coral viper slid from behind the necromancer's beard, and glided swiftly over his knees to the floor like a sinuous rill of scarlet. There, coiling as if to strike, it regarded the thieves with eyes that were cold and malignant as drops of frozen poison.

"By the black horns of Taaran!" cried Fustules. "It is one of Malygris' familiars. I have heard of this viper——"

Turning, the two would have fled from the room. But, even as they turned, the walls and portals seemed to recede before them, fleeing giddily and interminably, as if unknown gulfs had been admitted to the chamber. A vertigo seized them; reeling, they saw the little segments of mosaic under their feet assume the proportions of mighty flags. Around them the strewn books and censers and vials loomed enormous, rearing above their heads and barring their way as they ran.

Nygon, looking over his shoulder, saw that the viper had turned to a vast python, whose crimson coils were undulating swiftly along the floor. In a colossal chair, beneath lamps that were large as suns, there sat the colossal form of the dead archimage, in whose presence Nygon and Fustules were no more than pygmies. The lips of Malygris were still immobile beneath his beard; and his eyes still glared implacably upon the blackness of the far window. But at that instant a voice filled the awful spaces of the

room, reverberating like thunder in the heavens, hollow and tremendous:

"Fools! ye have dared to ask me for an oracle. And the oracle is—death!"

Nygon and Fustules, knowing their doom, fled on in a madness of terror and desperation. Beyond the towering thuribles, the tomes that were piled like pyramids, they saw the threshold in intermittent glimpses, like a remote horizon. It withdrew before them, dim and unattainable. They panted as runners pant in a dream. Behind them, the vermillion python crawled; and overtaking them as they tried to round the brazen back of a wizard volume, it struck them down like fleeing dormice. . . .

In the end, there was only a small coral viper, that crept back to its hiding-place in the bosom of Malygris. . . .

TOILING by day and night, in the vaults under the palace of Gadeiron, with impious charms and unholy conjurations, and fouler chemistries, Maranapion and his seven coadjutors had nearly completed the making of their sorcery.

They designed an invultuation against Malygris that would break the power of the dead necromancer by rendering evident to all the mere fact of his death. Employing an unlawful Atlantean science, Maranapion had created living plasm with all the attributes of human flesh, and had caused it to grow and flourish, fed with blood. Then he and his assistants, uniting their wills and invoking the forces that were blasphemy to summon, had compelled the shapeless, palpitating mass to put forth the limbs and members of a new-born child; and had formed it ultimately, after all the changes that man would undergo between birth and senescence, into an image of Malygris.

Now, carrying the process even fur-

ther, they had caused the simulacrum to die of extreme age, as Malygris had apparently died. It sat before them in a chair, facing toward the east, and duplicating the very posture of the magician on his seat of ivory.

Nothing remained to be done. Forspent and weary, but hopeful, the sorcerers waited for the first signs of mortal decay in the image. If the spells they had woven were successful, a simultaneous decay would occur in the body of Malygris, incorruptible heretofore. Inch by inch, member by member, he would rot in the adamantine tower. His familiars would desert him, no longer deceived; and all who came to the tower would know his mortality; and the tyranny of Malygris would lift from Susran, and his necromancy be null and void as a broken pentacle in sea-girt Poseidonis.

For the first time since the beginning of their invultuation, the eight magicians were free to intermit their vigilance without peril of invalidating the charm. They slept soundly, feeling that their repose was well earned. On the morrow they returned, accompanied by King Gadeiron, to the vault in which they had left the plasmic image.

Opening the sealed door, they were met by a charnel odor, and were gratified to perceive in the figure the unmistakable signs of decomposition. A little later, by consulting the Cyclops' eye, Maranapion verified the paralleling of these marks in the features of Malygris.

A great jubilation, not unmixed with relief, was felt by the sorcerers and by King Gadeiron. Heretofore, not knowing the extent and duration of the powers wielded by the dead master, they had been doubtful of the efficacy of their own magic. But now, it seemed, there was no longer any reason for doubt.

On that very day it happened that certain seafaring merchants went before Malygris to pay him, according to custom, a share of the profits of their latest voyage. Even as they bowed in the presence of the master, they became aware, by sundry disagreeable tokens, that they had borne tribute to a corpse. Not daring even then to refuse the long-exacted toll, they flung it down and fled from the place in terror.

Soon, in all Susran, there was none who doubted any longer the death of Malygris. And yet, such was the awe he had wrought through many lustrums, that few were venturous enough to invade the tower; and thieves were wary, and would not try to despoil its fabled treasures.

Day by day, in the blue, monstrous eye of the Cyclops, Maranapion saw the rotting of his dreaded rival. And upon him presently there came a strong desire to visit the tower and behold face to face that which he had witnessed only in vision. Thus alone would his triumph be complete.

So it was that he and the sorcerers who had aided him, together with King Gadeiron, went up to the sable tower by the steps of adamant, and climbed by the marble stairs, even as Nygon and Fustules before them, to the high room in which Malygris was seated. . . . But the doom of Nygon and Fustules, being without other witness than the dead, was wholly unknown to them.

BOLDLY and with no hesitation they entered the chamber. Slanting through the western window, the sun of late afternoon fell goldenly on the dust that had gathered everywhere. Spiders had woven their webs on the bright-jewelled censers, on the graven lamps, and the metal-covered volumes of sorcery.

The air was stagnant with a stifling foulness of death.

The intruders went forward, feeling that impulse which leads the victors to exult over a vanquished enemy. Malygris sat unbowed and upright, his black and tattered fingers clutching the ivory chair-arms as of yore, and his empty orbits glowering still at the eastern window. His face was little more than a bearded skull; and his blackening brow was like worm-pierced ebony.

"O Malygris, I give thee greeting," said Maranapion in a loud voice of mockery. "Grant, I beseech thee, a sign, if thy wizardry still prevails, and hath not become the appanage of oblivion."

"Greeting, O Maranapion," replied a grave and terrible voice that issued from the maggot-eaten lips. "Indeed, I will grant thee a sign. Even as I, in death, have rotted upon my seat from that foul sorcery which was wrought in the vaults of King Gadeiron, so thou and thy fellows and Gadeiron, *living*, shall decay and putrefy wholly in an hour, by virtue of the curse that I put upon ye now."

Then the shrunken corpse of Malygris, fulminating the runes of an old Atlantean formula, cursed the eight sorcerers and King Gadeiron. The formula, at frequent intervals, was cadenced with fatal names of lethal gods; and in it were told the secret appellations of the black god of time, and the Nothingness that abides beyond time; and use was made of the titles of many tomb-lairing demons. Heavy and hollow-sounding were the runes, and in them one seemed to hear a noise of great blows on sepulchral doors, and a clangor of downfallen slabs. The air darkened as if with the hovering of seasonless night, and thereupon, like a breathing of the night, a chillness entered the chamber; and it seemed that the black wings of ages passed over the tower, beat-

ing prodigiously from void to void, ere the curse was done.

Hearing that maranatha, the sorcerers were dumb with the extremity of their dread; and even Maranapion could recall no counter-spell effectual in any degree against it.

All would have fled from the room ere the curse ended, but a mortal weakness was upon them, and they felt a sickness as of quick-coming death. Shadows were woven athwart their eyes; but through the shadows, each beheld dimly the instant blackening of the faces of his fellows, and saw the cheeks fall ruinously, and the lips curl back on the teeth like those of long-dead cadavers.

Trying to run, each was aware of his own limbs that rotted beneath him, pace by pace, and felt the quick sloughing of his flesh in corruption from the bone. Crying out with tongues that shrivelled ere the cry was done, they fell down on the floor of the chamber. Life lingered in them, together with the dire knowledge of their doom, and they preserved something of hearing and sight. In the

dark agony of their live corruption, they tossed feebly to and fro, and crawled inchmeal on the chill mosaic. And they still moved in this fashion, slowly and more imperceptibly, till their brains were turned to gray mold, and the sinews were parted from their bones, and the marrow was dried up.

Thus, in an hour, the curse was accomplished. The enemies of the necromancer lay before him, supine and shrunken, in the tomb's final posture, as if doing obeisance to a seated Death. Except for the garments, none could have told King Gadeiron from Maranapion, nor Maranapion from the lesser wizards.

The day went by, declining seaward; and, burning like a royal pyre beyond Susran, the sunset flung an aureate glare through the window, and then dropped away in red brands and funereal ashes. And in the twilight a coral viper glided from the bosom of Malygris, and weaving among the remnants of them that lay on the floor, and slipping silently down the stairs of marble, it passed for ever from the tower.

B ehind the Screen

By DALE CLARK

The doomed man experienced a terrible awakening in that curious shop in Chinatown

SIGHT of the police officer at the corner roused Catlin from his delirious frenzy like a spray of cold water. He stopped short; he gasped, almost expelling the cigarette from his mouth. The lifting red haze of anger and dismay left him sober and shivering,

and a little stunned. He stared stupidly up the dingy Chinatown street into which the first rays of the morning were stealing. He had run many blocks, perhaps miles, to reach the heart of this dismal and unsavory quarter. But why? He could not say. Somnambulistic fumes

clouded his mind; he could remember only plunging on madly and blindly without having noticed either his direction or the breaking of day overhead. It was as if some invisible power had guided his flight. Aroused now, Catlin found his situation inexpressibly terrifying. And after a glance at the slit trouser leg, where the recently shaved flesh showed a bald and chalky white, he shrank into the doorway under the sign of Lung Wei.

To Catlin's surprise, the latch yielded under his fumbling hand. Inside, he stood stock-still, puffing hard at the cigarette and staring warily about the shop. A melancholy light leaking through the small, dust-coated window quickly melted and died in the pervading murky gloom. But a faint and nebulous glow spread from an Oriental screen stretched across the rear of the long, narrow, low room. The screen was of some translucent and gauzy stuff; it had the color of silver, and shimmered with a rosy iridescence as minute ripples stirred the gossamer surface.

Behind the screen, a single candle burned with a wan and discouraged flame; its dim glimmer fell in crepuscular half-tones upon a robed figure slumbering in a cane chair. That, too, was behind the gauzy curtain.

Catlin wet his lips nervously. An uneasy sensation overpowered him: it was that he had been here before. But that, of course, could not be. His mind was playing tricks again. . . . Then he smiled harshly.

It was the odor he had recognized. There was in the shop a smell of dead incense, dry and musty and blended with the peculiar trail of opium. The musky taste in the air resembled that which he had often detected in his wife's room—she was a narcotic addict.

W. T.—7

It was only the odor; it could be nothing more.

On tiptoe, without making a sound, he advanced into the shadows and inspected the squat show-cases and counters ranged along the low walls. He saw tiny figurines of wood and jade, vases and jars of porcelain, cabinets, sandals, and embroidered cloths. But there was nothing he could convert into money without much difficulty.

He glided toward the screen. (He had become marvelously adept in muffling his footfalls, these past few hours.)

Nevertheless, the figure in the chair behind the screen stirred, and looked around, and arose. He was Chinese, and very old. He came close to the diaphanous gauze, smiling a strange and enigmatic smile.

"Ah, here you are!" he said. "At last!"

This Lung Wei wore a black skull-cap, and had gathered about his thin shoulders a stiff, richly brocaded crimson robe. Above the robe, his thin, wrinkled, clean-shaven face had in its expression the delicacy of ancient and yellowed lace. It was, in fact, an expression too delicate, too indefinable, for analysis; it was bland, inscrutable, and mystic as well.

Staring, Catlin forgot that he had been about to hurl himself through the screen. It struck him that there was something dimly familiar in that countenance; he might have glimpsed Lung Wei in a crowd once, or it might have been only in a dream.

"Yes," he faltered, confused.

"I knew you'd come," the Oriental said. He spoke without any accent, with the merest sibilant slurring of syllables. "You see, I have waited so patiently!"

Catlin reflected. Concealed as he stood in the shadows—and seen through the screen, too—he decided that the Chinaman had mistaken him for someone else.

"Well, here I am!" he parried gruffly. It could be no harm, this little game.

Lung Wei arched his eyebrows. "You are not afraid, young sir?" he asked softly.

Catlin puffed his cigarette. "No," he said with a laugh. "Not at all. Of course not."

"That is well." The Oriental removed his hands from the sleeves of the robe, extending them in a curious gesture of—was it appeal? Or perhaps invitation. The outspread fingers looked quite as tenuous and pale as the gossamer screen itself. "You must believe this," he said, "that I want only to help you."

Catlin did not say anything, but his heart began to beat with a furious, groping hope. Decidedly, this became interesting!

LUNG WEI regarded him steadily through the shimmering curtain. "That is why I waited so long. I thought that I might be of some service to you." The delicate, unknowable smile played upon his worn and yellowed face. "Do you find that hard to understand? You—you are so very young! That was what impressed me at the first—your so-blind youth. I wonder what you thought of me. Perhaps that I was so very old, eh? Or perhaps you did not think at all?"

The musing voice dripped away into placid silence. Catlin leaned watchfully against a show-case, filling his lungs with the cigarette smoke and letting it drift from his nostrils. He said nothing. There was nothing to say.

"You do not understand, do you?" the Oriental murmured.

Catlin watched the candle brighten, watched a ripple of ruby cross the screen.

"No," he said at last.

"But that is natural." Lung Wei bobbed his head sagely. "It is confusing. One is not exactly prepared. And then,

you left in such haste. You have had no time to think."

Cold perspiration cropped forth on Catlin's face at these soft, sibilant words. Some divining sixth sense warned him of an inexplicable peril.

"No!" he exclaimed roughly. "I—that is, you—both of us—why, it's all a mistake! I'm not the man, whoever he is, you were waiting for; I came in to"—he hesitated—"to the wrong shop!"

But with his enigmatic and relentless smile, the old Chinaman said: "In that case, you had better go back. If you think I can help you when you have returned to the prison—"

With a strangled cry, Catlin started toward the screen. He raised his clenched fist.

"So you know!" he panted.

Then, and at the moment he was about to dash aside the shimmering veil, a dazzling light burst within his disordered mind; he stopped short, and the fist dropped numbly to his side.

"But then," he faltered, "if you knew—what you said about helping me—?"

He peered at the face of Lung Wei, serene and bland behind the gauze.

"It's a trick!" he said hoarsely. "A Chinese trick!"

Lung Wei laughed musically. It was not a laugh of amusement or of scorn; there was perhaps a note of pity in it.

"You do not understand, young sir," the liquid voice said.

"No," Catlin muttered.

He felt strangely dizzy. That was the sheen of the candlelight flickering on the glistening gossamer; that, and the smell of the dead incense crawling into his lungs and into his very blood.

He began to walk to and fro in front of the curtain. Presently he said slowly, "There is one solution. This man I killed—you knew him, is that it? He might

have been your enemy. Let us say, he belonged to a rival Tong. That is why you offer me your help?"

He stared interrogatively at the veil. But the face of the Chinaman remained impassive, like a sheet of parchment wrinkled into indecipherable lines.

Catlin made an apologetic gesture, an opening and falling of his hands. "I do not expect you to commit yourself," he said hurriedly. "It does not matter. The thing is, I must get away. I need money. Clothes." He looked despairingly at the slit trouser leg. "I can't go far, like this."

"It is not that," Lung Wei said. "You will have to tell me exactly what happened. Otherwise—I am sorry. There would be nothing I could do."

Catlin took a long pull at the cigarette.

"I know what you mean," he muttered. "You are afraid. You needn't be. They can't trace me here. No one has seen me since I escaped. No one at all."

"We are talking at cross-purposes," Lung Wei said. "If you will tell me exactly how it was—then, it may be, I can help."

"I am at your mercy," Catlin muttered. "I will try to remember. It is not very clear—there are things I can recall perfectly, and other parts of it that are quite gone."

Lung Wei made again that gesture of appeal—of sympathy, it might have been—with his hands outspread, the fingers like pale smoke, the palms dark shadows. "It is for your good, young sir."

Catlin shivered. "The worst was when the priest put the oil, the peculiar oil, over my eyes. And on my fingers. That happened, you understand, in the cell. It was because I could not stand any more! I rolled the cigarette. And when I licked it, at the same time I dropped onto my tongue the wad of cigarette papers."

He looked through the screen into the Oriental's face.

"The pellet tasted bitter. In your country, you know about that. You may have saturated paper, or a cloth with a drug? That is the way Blossom—my wife—smuggled this stuff to me."

He stood silent, thinking, watching the smoke drift upward from his lips into the dry, dead-scented air.

"I did not intend to kill that man," he said at last. "I am a respectable man, a chemist. And I could not earn money enough for her—for Blossom—to buy that stuff. That was how she met Trent, Billy Trent, met him in one of those dens where they smoke it. They put their heads together and told me how I could get it for them. It was Trent's gun I used. They waited outside in his automobile and I went in; they sent me in because the dealer would not know me. But I did not intend to kill him."

HE RESUMED his pacing in front of the screen.

"The police were continually after me, continually asking me who had been in the car. They even promised to commute the sentence to life imprisonment if I'd tell where I got the gun. That was why Blossom brought me the cigarette papers—so at the last I wouldn't lose my nerve and confess. Being doped, you see, I could go to the chair without any fear. I swallowed the wad, the whole pellet, all that she had brought me."

"I could feel it burning in my stomach. I wasn't used to that sort of thing, and for a while I was afraid it wouldn't take hold soon enough. The warden had come in. I tried to put him off, asking for a match to light the cigarette. He didn't have one. Perhaps he saw through me. I had been sitting on the edge of the bunk; I got up and went over to the

wash-stand to the candles, those candles the priest was burning.

"I remember he said something horrified. Then it happened. As I straightened up from the candles, with the first puff I became all at once sick. The dose must have been a big one. I staggered. I could feel and hear the bones in my head grinding and crunching upon themselves. When I opened my eyes, I was lying on the floor. I sat up and looked around. The priest was kneeling there in front of his candles, praying. His robe made it look like he was kneeling in a pool of black water, the robe spilled around his knees. The warden was gone."

Catlin flung back his head and laughed, filling the shop with the reverberations of his laughter.

"I suppose he had run to get the prison doctor, making sure I shouldn't cheat the chair, after all!"

He lowered his voice.

"You won't believe it," he said, "but he had left the cell door open. I crept there, on my hands and knees, so as not to disturb the priest. And the corridor was empty. I closed my eyes and opened them again to make sure."

"So I went out. I walked down the corridor, and down the stair, and so into the prison yard. You understand, all this was in the dark, before sunrise. I waited there beside the death-house wall. After a while they opened the gate to let in a car—newspaper men coming to cover the execution—and I ran out through the open gate. No one saw me."

He looked fixedly at the man behind the screen of gauze.

"It was as simple as that," he said insistently. "It was as easy as coming in here, coming into your shop."

"Of course," said Lung Wei. "Proceed."

"I went straight home," Catlin mut-

tered. "I thought that the three of us—Blossom, and Trent, and I—could think of some safe place for me. I remember fancying how, afterward, we'd all laugh about the way that drug fooled the warden. I was quite happy about it."

The Chinaman gave him a curious glance. "Did you walk?" he asked.

Catlin became confused. "I don't know," he stammered. "I can't remember—the drug, you see—I suppose I took a street-car. It is quite a long way. I suppose that is what I did. I am perfectly sure no one noticed me, however it was."

The Oriental said, "But it is important, young sir. Can't you think?"

"I got there, anyway," Catlin told him. "I rang the bell—rang it again and again. And Blossom didn't answer. I waited there on the porch, smoking, and trying to think what to do next. And then a car—Trent's car—stopped out in front, and those two came up onto the porch together."

His voice trembled.

"They were in evening clothes. They had been to some club or other. On the night I was to die, you see, it had been that way with them. They had been dancing and drinking. I smelled the liquor on them when I went up and spoke to her."

The eyes of the Oriental burned with a strange eagerness. "So, young sir—?"

"She did not even hear me!" Catlin declared. He avoided the gaze of Lung Wei, and continued wearily:

"They had eyes and ears only for each other. Without noticing me, they fell into each other's arms."

He began to laugh shakily. "Perhaps I should have killed them both! On the contrary, I was glad to escape. I was like an animal crawling away to lick its hurt in silence. Besides, would they have helped me? They would only have notified the police!" Then he added, almost

calmly, "But, as they did not see me, there is no danger from that source."

"**T**HAT is true," said Lung Wei. He appeared to reflect; his pointed yellow chin rested upon the gathered collar of the brocade robe, and his eyes were lowered.

"Your cigarette," he said at last.

"What did you say?" Catlin asked.

He stared at the screen, which had grown suddenly brighter, with a myriad of little colored glints flashing upon its shining surface. The candle in the background burned no better than before. . . . The gossamer seemed to quiver and glow with a luminous life of its own.

He looked down at the cigarette. The steady white wisp rose in a spiral from its end, from the little molten tip; and he had been smoking it for so long, for hours perhaps.

"Did I roll another?" he asked in bewilderment. "I don't remember that."

"If you will observe its odor," said the liquid Oriental voice of Lung Wei. "That is not a drug, young sir. I, who am used to such things, recognize the presence of a poison——"

"Poison!" cried Catlin in a dry sob. "Then she—then that is why—but that would mean——"

The words stumbled and blurred into a groan as Catlin reeled back from the thought. He stared blankly into that shimmering veil of gauze. And now it blazed up in pitiless molten brilliance; it extended to titanic proportions; it became a scroll of fire. His confused eyes beheld incandescent suns wheeling in its argent depths. He cowered in a funnel of searing light. His flesh seemed to shrivel in that glare, his breath clotted in his throat, and a fierce whining, crackling sound thrashed and gibbered about his ears. The suns rushed past him, the curtain en-

folded him and drew him into a weird spaceland where the myriad lights receded to pin-points. This sudden darkness was more terrible than the intolerable light had been. With a cry of despair he plunged ahead, striking madly with both fists.

Then he realized that he was fighting the little gauze screen. The gossamer was cool, like a stream of water passing over his hands. It tore with a strange tinkling sound, a patter of distant bells.

It lay in a cloud of crumpled silver at his feet. The little jeweled particles in the fabric winked in the candle-light.

Catlin raised his eyes to the face of Lung Wei.

A chill seized him; the next moment, a fever came stinging through his veins. Without the screen to veil it, the face was——

"I remember you, now," he said. "You are the man I killed."

The Oriental smiled his enigmatic, mystic smile.

"That is so," replied the imperturbable yellow man. "You understand, then. Are you ready?"

"Ready?" Catlin faltered.

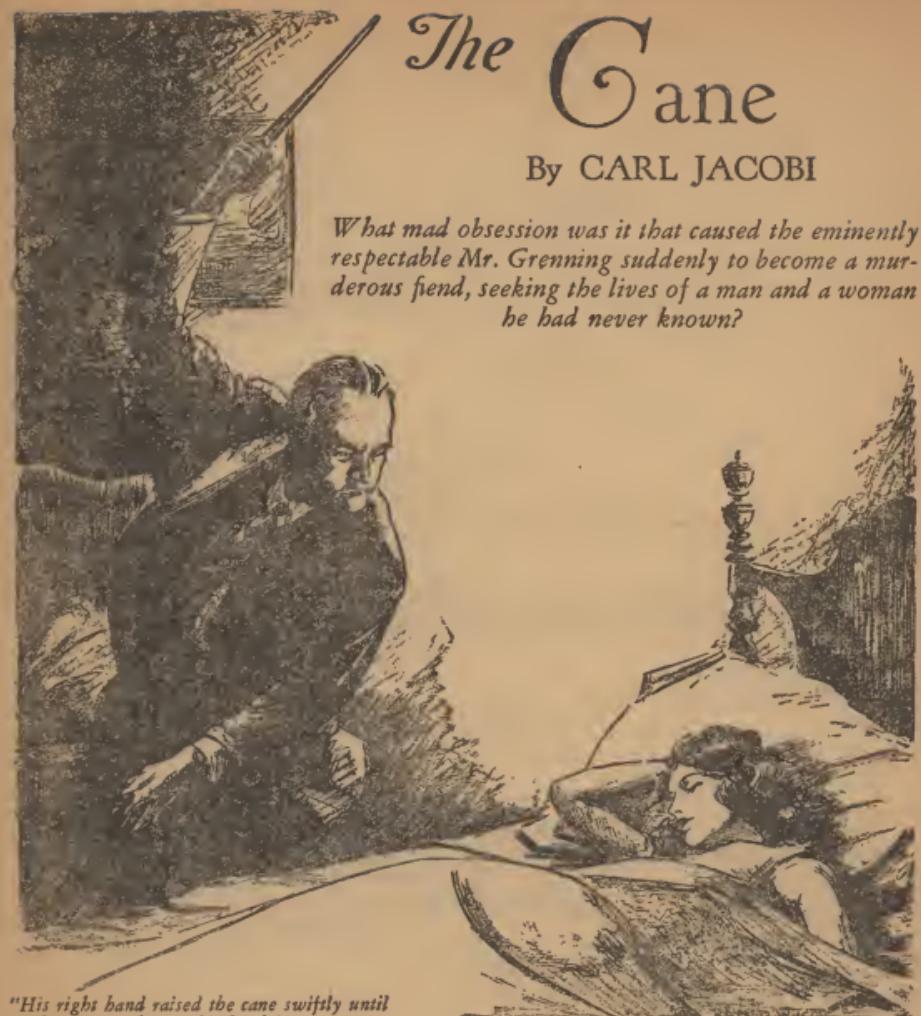
"To go," said Lung Wei.

Catlin nodded. Lung Wei blew out the candle, and walked out of the shop, and the younger man followed.

There was a long moment in which Lung Wei locked the door of his establishment, and in which Catlin stood gazing into the street. The sun was well up, now, and a thin trickle of traffic stirred upon the pavement. A milk-wagon clattered over the street-car rails. A fruit peddler went by, his legs scissoring between the shafts of his cart. Away off in the city a factory whistle blew.

Catlin touched the brocaded sleeve of Lung Wei.

"Which way?" he asked.



The Cane

By CARL JACOBI

What mad obsession was it that caused the eminently respectable Mr. Grenning suddenly to become a murderous fiend, seeking the lives of a man and a woman he had never known?



"His right hand raised the cane swiftly until it hung poised over his head."

MR. JAMES GRENNING, retired senior partner in the firm of Bay, Halstead & Grenning, Lincoln's Inn Fields, was a most punctual person. It was his custom to leave his residence in Bloomsbury each morning save Sunday, walk past High Holborn, down Kingsway as far as Great Queen Street and return by way of Drury Lane. He left at precisely ten o'clock. At eleven he stopped in a small tobacconist's shop to purchase a Rosa Trofero cigar. And

his steps were so regulated as to bring him back to his door just as the hands of the hallway clock pointed to the hour of noon.

During these morning promenades, which were undertaken with the advice of a physician, Mr. Grenning always carried a cane. He neither needed the wooden support nor cared for the traditional modish effect it added to a masculine costume. He merely liked canes.

The odd part of it was, however, that

each day was carefully observed with a different stick. Monday, he carried a black Malacca. Tuesday, it was a thin shaft of rosewood. Wednesday, a heavier length of oak. Thursday, ebony. Friday, a strip of mahogany topped with an ivory handle. And Saturday, a delicately formed piece of walnut, very plain and very simple.

Apart from canes, Mr. Grenning was not in the slightest given to shows of temperament. And absurd though it may sound, his only reason for this one discrepancy was to remind him in his rather drab existence, of the exact day of the week.

It was on Thursday, a gray morning which had been preceded by a night of chilling rain, that Mr. Grenning left his residence as usual promptly at ten o'clock. At twelve o'clock the tobacconist was quite surprised that his regular customer had not appeared. And at one Mr. Grenning's housekeeper stood astounded in the hallway when she observed by the vacant hat-tree that her lodger had not yet returned.

Obviously only an incident distinctly apart from the commonplace could have caused Mr. Grenning to interrupt his careful routine in such a manner. For no other reason would he have taken it upon himself to dash wildly down Clarges Street and enter without knocking the luxurious apartment of his old friend, Sir Hugh Stanway.

Sir Hugh sat slumped in a huge, overstuffed chair and gazed with curious eyes at the ashen face of his unexpected visitor.

"Now, Grenning," he said firmly but soothingly, "stop all this wild babbling and start from the beginning. I haven't the slightest idea what you're talking about."

With shaking hands Mr. Grenning

helped himself to the decanter on the table, poured out a stiff portion of brandy and drank it at a swallow.

"Do you see anything wrong with this cane?" he asked tremulously, handing the stick across.

Sir Hugh reached for the smooth shaft, turned it over and over in his thin, graceful hands, balanced it on one knee and squinted down its wooden length to see if it were warped. Then he held it out before him, gripped at each end in the manner of a swordsman testing the strength of a blade.

IT WAS not an unusual cane. Fashioned of a heavy, grainless wood, topped with a small cap of gold, and weathered and battered from long use, it looked the typical walking-stick of an unassuming gentleman of the middle class. Sir Hugh handed it back to its owner and raised his eyes inquiringly.

"It isn't one of the six you usually carry," he said. "Other than that, I see nothing wrong with it. Why?"

"Stanway," said Mr. Grenning, swallowing hard, "that cane is haunted! Haunted, I say! And if I don't get rid of it, I'll go mad. I'd have broken it into kindling hours ago if something, some inner force, hadn't prevented me."

"Ghosts?" asked Sir Hugh dryly, a suggestion of a smile at his lips.

"I've had it only since yesterday," continued Grenning, unmindful of the interruption. "Bought it at an auction for eight shillings to replace the one I broke last week. Today I carried it for the first time on my usual morning walk."

"It happened on Great Queen Street, shortly before eleven o'clock. There are several oldish houses in the block, you may remember. Freemason's Hall is just beyond. Well, a funeral was leaving from one of the buildings, and I had to

stop a moment before I could go on. Six pall-bearers were carrying the casket out of the doorway to the waiting hearse just as I came up.

"Curious how the sight of a funeral immediately sobers one. I stood there, trying hard not to stare. And yet I remember casually noticing the pall-bearer nearest me, the man who supported the right rear corner of the casket. He was a tall, dark-haired individual of about thirty years of age; his profile stood forth strikingly handsome, but as he turned, I couldn't help musing over the expression that twisted the line of his lips. Almost a smirk, it was, as if he were enjoying the whole affair.

"From then on, Stanway, I can't be sure what happened. It was horrible, revolting, and to my dying day I'll never forget it. My cane—this cane—was propped at an angle at my side, slightly supporting me as I stood waiting for the procession to pass. Suddenly I felt a distinct tremor pass up the wood through the handle. It was a vibration, a shock as if . . . well, as if the metal cap at the bottom had come into contact with an electric current.

"For a moment I thought the aged wood must be breaking. Then that tremor changed to a violent jerk. I felt the cane pull my hand upward, high over my head, poised there for an instant, and then lash back and forth through the air like a whip.

"With that stick raised above me, something seemed to snap in my brain. I felt as if my head were clamped in a vise, as if some power other than my own were controlling my thoughts. I believe I shouted some terrible oath, something at any rate that turned the surrounding crowd around to stare at me. Then I ran forward like a beast, seized that last pall-bearer by the shoulder,

spun him around and—God help me!—brought the cane crashing down full upon his head.

"Oh, I know it sounds common enough in these modern times of ours, simply beating a man on the head. But it was hellish to do, hellish to realize that I couldn't help myself. It was like some damned Juggernaut striking the first thing in its path. And coupled with the fact that the man was part of a funeral procession, which is macabre even in itself, the effect was hideous.

"I had one look at him as he fell away from the coffin and collapsed on the sidewalk, blood streaming down his forehead. Then I turned and ran."

Mr. Grenning slumped back in his chair and stared helplessly across the table. "Since then I've been wandering the streets with the fear and desperation of a hunted animal. I didn't kill the man, Stanway. I saw him stumble to his feet—thank Heaven!—just as I raced around the corner. But the stark horror lies in the fact that I'm not responsible, that I can't explain why I did it. My will was controlled by some power from without, and absurd as it may sound, that power came unmistakably from — this cane!"

The clock on the mantel ticked off a minute before Sir Hugh broke the silence.

"The man you struck, you're quite sure he was a stranger?"

Mr. Grenning nodded vehemently. "I never saw him in my life before."

"And your health during, say the last few weeks, it has been quite all right?"

"Health?" Mr. Grenning bristled. "Damme, Stanway, are you trying to——"

"I'm merely asking questions," interposed Sir Hugh. "You can answer them or not as you see fit. You say you bought this cane at an auction?"

"Yes, at Carter's, yesterday. I paid eight shillings for it."

"Any idea who was its former owner?"

"No. Hold on. Yes, I believe I do. The last part of the auction dealt entirely with the property of a man by the name of Wells, Stephen Wells. I remember reading of his death in the *Times*. I don't know *him* either."

Sir Hugh nodded. "One thing more," he said, choosing his words with care. "Were there any queer circumstances surrounding the sale?"

Mr. Grenning hesitated a moment in retrospection. When he looked up, there was a frown of puzzlement lined across his brow. "Now that you speak of it," he replied, "there was. I wasn't the highest bidder. The bidding started at three shillings. It worked up to six. I offered eight. But the man behind me called out ten almost immediately after I had spoken. I thought it odd that the auctioneer accepted my price instead of the higher amount, which he most certainly had heard; odd, too, that the man behind me made no objection when I moved forward to complete the sale."

Into Sir Hugh's eyes there was slowly creeping a gleam of interest. He rose to his feet, strode across to the window and stood staring out into the gray, cheerless street. Absently he drew a pipe from his pocket and rattled the stem against his teeth.

"Grenning," he said suddenly, returning to the table, "if anyone but you had told me this story I'd say he was a crazy fool. But I've known you for a good many years, and I know you're telling the truth. Have I your permission to look into this?"

Mr. Grenning looked up dully. "Yes, of course," he said. "That's why I came here. But how——"

"There's something wrong here, be-

lieve me, something decidedly wrong. I'm going out—going to see if I can unearth a few facts. Wait here for me, Grenning. It would be better you didn't appear on the streets for a while. Your room is first along the right hall."

"But haven't you anything to say at all?" snapped Mr. Grenning. "Haven't you any ideas?"

"Not now," replied Sir Hugh, reaching for his hat and gloves. The gleam in his eyes had increased to an excited glitter. "I want to look around a bit before I make any comments. Only this I can tell you quite positively: the funeral you interrupted so rudely was that of Stephen Wells, the former owner of the cane."

THE afternoon passed for Mr. Grenning with maddening slowness. Again and again he attempted to thrust himself in the pages of a book and forget his thoughts. But each time the print blurred and a vision of the afternoon's horrible experience formed like an optic scar before his eyes. Evening came, and still Sir Hugh did not return. Mr. Grenning barely tasted the food served by Stanway's man-servant. He continued to pace back and forth the length of the library until a nervous drowsiness slowly settled over him. At length, brain in a whirl, he went to his bed and stared at the designs on the wallpaper until the very concentration threw him into a fitful sleep.

He dreamed wild dreams of running through the streets of London, caning every pedestrian within reach and leaving a trail of horribly mutilated dead behind him. At two o'clock by the radium clock on the bureau he awoke abruptly, sat up in bed, trembling in every nerve and muscle.

The room was hot and suffocating.

The wind had died down, and the whole world seemed steeped in a great ringing silence. For a moment Mr. Grenning was puzzled as to what had happened. After all, he reasoned sleepily, it was foolish to let such a small incident bother him. He hadn't killed the man, had merely struck him a blow on the head, and by tomorrow the few who had chanced to see the action would have forgotten. The daily history of London must be filled with such things.

Yet as he sat there, now fully awake, he realized his brain was slowly giving way to an overpowering sensation. It was an urge, a definite, irresistible urge, that he dress, go out and walk once again those same streets down which he passed every morning.

Mr. Grenning had long been a man of habit, but he gave in to routine only through the process of time. To submit to a mere mental suggestion, especially a wild one like this, seemed the act of a weakling. He called to arm every ounce of will-power he possessed to fight it.

As the clock ticked on and on, however, the sensation grew stronger. He felt as if his entire body were encased in a suit of iron, and outside his window some powerful magnet had swept him into its field.

At length he could stand it no longer, and with a little whimper of submission, he leaped from bed, turned on the light, and proceeded to don his clothes. Dressed, he moved to the door, only to hesitate on the sill, staring back over his shoulder.

His cane! It stood there, propped up against the chair where he had left it. Slowly Mr. Grenning paced back the length of the room and halted a few feet away, staring down at the heavy stick. He clenched his fists, tried to turn in his tracks and swayed weakly. When a mo-

ment later he slipped out the front door and made his way to the street, the cane was clenched hard under one arm.

A late cab cruising along Piccadilly carried him down Coventry, Cranburn, Long Acre and finally to Great Queen Street. He realized now, as he paid the driver, that the unexplainable psychic urge which had forced him on this mad adventure was sweeping him not only into the general district of his afternoon walks, but toward one house in particular, the Wells residence from which he had seen Mr. Wells' funeral leave.

And presently he stood before it, a once-fashionable residence, made gaunt and somber by the passing years, set flush with the sidewalk. Up to this point, Mr. Grenning had been a man puzzled and bewildered, responding to something he didn't understand. Now as he glanced down the silent thoroughfare and then at the brooding mass of gables at his side, he suddenly changed.

The look of bewilderment gave way to one of craft. His head shrank lower into the protecting collar of his coat, and he moved cautiously into the shadows as if afraid of being seen. Five minutes he waited while the bobby on the opposite side of the street whistled his way around the corner. Then he stole silently up the steps of the dark house, fumbled at the latch, inserted one of his own keys in the antiquated lock, and after a moment of twisting, slipped inside.

A long hallway, dimly illuminated by a single night-light, confronted him. Without hesitation, Mr. Grenning crept to the first door on his right, opened it, and passed into a room that was a pit of darkness. He was moving forward steadily now, deliberately, treading unfamiliar ground, yet avoiding table, desk, and chairs with an uncanny sense of direction.

At the farther wall a third door barred

his passage, and he halted momentarily to get a firmer grip on the cane. Then he pushed open this last barrier and stared within. A shaft of yellow light from the street lamp outside filtered through the huge bay window of the room and disclosed directly before him the heavy bulk of an old-fashioned canopied bed.

For a moment Mr. Grenning stood there, head erect, shoulders thrown stiffly back like some strange automaton. Then slowly in measured pace he stepped forward, advancing on his shadow.

A young woman lay sleeping in the bed, a woman whose tousled black hair and closed eyes did not conceal the fine molding and delicate beauty of her features. She was breathing deeply and regularly, one arm folded above her head, covers drawn slightly away from her throat.

Not a line of expression found its way into Mr. Grenning's face. He surveyed the woman coldly as the silence of the old house hung like a pall about him. He continued to stand motionless as hollowly from a distant street came the roar and clatter of a far-away tram-car.

Then with the relentless motion of a machine his right hand raised his cane swiftly until it hung poised high over his head. Deliberately he moved closer, estimated his aim, and brought the heavy stick crashing down upon the head of his victim.

A single, penetrating scream came from the woman's lips as she rose up, clawed wildly at the bedclothes and then with a low gurgle slumped back against the pillow.

Mr. Grenning looked down at her. A tremor swept through his frame as he stared at the silent, bloody form. A short dry gasp slid through his clenched teeth. Then with a smothered sob he turned and moved slowly toward the door.

A voice from an upper room called down fearfully: "Mrs. Wells! Are you all right?"

With machine-like pace Mr. Grenning continued his way through an adjoining room. Not until he reached the outer hallway and a rush of feet sounded behind him, did he alter his speed. Then with a hideous cry of defiance, which seemed to come from another throat than his own, he lurched into a run, threw open the door and staggered forth into the dark street.

SIR HUGH STANWAY flung the latest edition of the Friday *Times* on his library table and looked across at the silent figure opposite him. If Grenning had been frightened and bewildered when he appeared at the door of Sir Hugh's rooms the night before, he presented a picture of absolute despair now. His gray hair was clawed into wild disarray, his eyes gleamed hard and feverish, and his hands as he gripped the arms of his chair opened and closed convulsively.

"I'm a murderer!" he moaned aloud for the tenth time.

Sir Hugh frowned perplexedly. "How many times must I tell you, Grenning, that you're nothing of the sort? The paper here gives a full account of last night's happenings. Mrs. Wells suffered only lacerations of the scalp. The pillow, it seems, partly protected her. It is very strange though that you should choose as your second victim the widow of the man whose funeral you interrupted the day before."

"Stanway," said Mr. Grenning, "if you don't do something to help me, I'll go mad. Realize—can't you?—that during the entire event, from the moment I entered the house, I absolutely couldn't help myself. Another will was controlling me, and yet I was horribly conscious of

everything that was done. Beating that defenseless woman as she lay there—God, it was terrible!"

For a moment Sir Hugh studied his friend in silence. Then he settled back in his chair.

"I went to considerable trouble to unearth facts," he said. "But the information I have gathered offers nothing in the way of explanation that a sane brain can understand.

"You bought this cane at an auction. It was formerly the property of a Stephen Wells, now deceased. So much, you know already. Wells was a very rich man, Grenning. He was sole owner of the Wells East Indies Products Company, and when he died he left a considerable fortune to his wife. But whereas he had been a success financially, his marriage had been a complete failure. I've heard of antipathy between man and wife before, but never anything like this. That woman was so relieved at her husband's death that she had the unparalleled audacity to dispose of his possessions at public action even before he was decently buried."

Mr. Grenning looked up slowly. "What has all that to do with my cane?" he queried.

"Very much. Those articles of Wells' that were offered for sale included some of his most personal possessions, and among them was your cane. Now the cane has quite a story connected with it that is rather generally known among Wells' friends.

"Wells, it seems, was in the yearly habit of taking business trips through the East Indies to look over some of his company's property. It was in North Borneo, inland from Sandakan, that he saved a Dyak witch-doctor from death. He shot a king cobra only a few inches from the native's foot. The witch-doctor

was so filled with gratitude he presented Wells with a strange gift.

"It was a shaft of wood, fashioned from the branch of a death-tree. If you are at all acquainted with the customs of those natives of Borneo, Grenning, you will know that some tribes have a most peculiar practise in the burying of their dead. They choose a large tree, hollow out an aperture in the trunk, insert the corpse in an erect position and then seal the opening. The tree continues to grow, a living tomb, and is from then on an object of religious veneration.

"This particular piece of wood came from the branch of a tree in which had been buried the body of the witch-doctor's predecessor, a Dyak priest. The wood was therefore supposed to be endowed with the power of protecting one in case of danger and working revenge on one's enemies.

"Two days later, while Wells was returning down-river in a native dugout, his party was attacked from ambush. Poisonous darts from *sumpitan* blow-guns killed three native guides and one other white man. Wells experienced a marvelous escape. The piece of wood given him by the witch-doctor happened to be propped up against his equipment before him. One of the darts, which would have found its mark in his throat, struck the wood and was deflected to the side.

"Arriving at the coast, Wells had the shaft made into a cane and vowed it would never leave his side. He seemed to have kept this promise, for wherever he went, that cane was always with him."

The narration ceased for a moment, and Mr. Grenning stirred restlessly. "I still don't see—" he began.

"There are just a few things more," interrupted Sir Hugh. "The man you struck yesterday while he carried the coffin of Stephen Wells was Philip Garn,

a well-known idler in gambling circles, and he represents the third part of the triangle in Wells' unhappy marriage. It is open gossip that Mrs. Wells was in love with him, wanted to marry him, and sought by every means to force her husband to grant a divorce, an action which he refused to take. It seems a cruel gesture on her part to have chosen Garn as one of the pall-bearers.

"Now then"—Sir Hugh drummed his fingers reflectively on the arm of the chair—"I offer no conclusions. The whole thing looks impossible from start to finish. All I can say is that it would seem by your recounting of the odd way in which you purchased the cane at the auction, it was foreordained that you, who are known always to carry a cane and to walk daily past that Wells house on Great Queen Street, should be its new owner."

CURIOUSLY enough, Mr. Grenning had almost the same dreams that night as he had the night before. But there was one vision in addition, a most vivid one that so stayed by him, he couldn't refrain from telling it in detail to Sir Hugh over the breakfast table.

"It seemed that the ringing of the door-bell roused me in the middle of the night," he began. "I could have sworn that I was awake, that I got out of bed, put on the dressing-gown you loaned me, and hurried down the hall to answer it.

"When I opened the door and stood shivering on the threshold, two men confronted me. And they were the strangest pair I had ever seen. The one on the right was a tall, spare-looking Englishman, a common enough fellow, I suppose, if he had worn regular clothes. But what did he have on but a suit of white duck and a pith helmet! There wasn't a trace of color in his face. It was white

as lime. And his eyes! God, Stanway, they seemed nothing more than two black holes. I started backward and stared. The other looked even more like a page out of a book. He was a native of some kind, stark naked save for a loin-cloth and a cap of queer-looking feathers on his head. Over his left arm he carried the dried and stiffened body of a dead snake.

"They stepped in, and the white man said, as if it were the most ordinary thing in the world: 'We've come for the cane!'"

Sir Hugh laid down his tea-cup sharply. His gray eyes slowly widened.

"And in this dream," he asked, "did you see yourself giving the men the cane?"

"Yes, I——"

With a start Sir Hugh kicked back his chair, jumped to his feet and ran to the umbrella cabinet in the outer room. He thrust the little door open and peered inside. The rack, which the night before had held the cane, was now empty!

Whirling, Sir Hugh leaped across the room and made his way quickly to the hallway. Here he bent down on his knees, examined the rug and the uncovered floor before the door. And an instant later, a smothered exclamation burst from his lips.

Clearly outlined on the maple parquet was the muddy outline of a naked human foot!

"Quick, Grenning!" Sir Hugh turned on his stupefied guest who stood staring at the mark on the floor. "There's not a moment to lose. Come on."

As their cab sped down Piccadilly, Stanway sat silently, unrelaxed, staring with impatient eyes at the flying streets. Only once did he break his silence, and that was to urge the driver to greater speed.

Along Great Queen Street through a maze of traffic they raced. Then, framed like a photograph in the windshield, their destination loomed up before them. It was the Wells house, and before it was collected a milling crowd.

SIR HUGH looked out before him, took in the scene at a glance and struck his fist sharply on the leather upholstery.

"Too late, Grenning," he said.

They left the cab and began shouldering their way through the crowd, Stanway opening up a lane for Grenning to follow. And abruptly a moment later at a point half-way between the curb and the steps they reached the inner edge of the silent crowd and stood staring at the gruesome spectacle before them. Mr. Grenning felt suddenly faint.

Lying on the sidewalk were two blood-spattered figures, a man and a woman. The man was Philip Garn, whom Mr. Grenning had struck during the funeral procession. The woman was Mrs. Wells. It did not need a medical examiner to see that both had been instantly killed. Their heads were horribly crushed and battered.

Stanway turned away to a tall, lean man who was standing to one side, a notebook in his hand.

"Good morning, Inspector Melton, do you remember me?"

The man looked up and then stared in recognition. "I should say I do. I——"

"Tell me," Stanway broke in hurriedly, "how did this dreadful thing happen?"

Inspector Melton frowned. "Double murder," he said shortly, "and it's the strangest case I've ever come upon, if we can believe everything we've heard."

"Murder?"

"Yes. The man is Philip Garn, you know. He was Mrs. Wells' lover, I guess, now that Mr. Wells is dead. The two of them were just returning to London from a day out in Sussex. Somebody had a score to settle apparently and waited for them. A moment after they stepped out of the cab they were both struck over the head from behind with a cane. We've got the cane inside. But the queer part is that the cabby swears he didn't see a soul on the street. Says he had driven the cab only a few yards after leaving when he heard two screams and turned just in time to see them fall to the sidewalk. Nobody else, he claims, was anywhere in sight. It's mighty strange."

Stanway nodded slowly. "Thank you, Inspector," he said. "Come, Grenning, we may as well go."

ON MONDAY, October the 12th, the evening edition of the *London News-Chronicle* carried the following small account on the bottom of its third page:

A strange and ironic sidelight was added by officials of Scotland Yard today to the yet unsolved tragedy which occurred on Great Queen Street. The victims, it will be remembered, were Mrs. Stephen Wells and Mr. Philip Garn, both of whom were killed by heavy blows from a cane wielded by an unknown assailant.

Mrs. Wells was the recent widow of the late Stephen W. Wells, owner of the Wells East Indies Products Company, who died early last week. Since his death rumors have been current among Mr. Wells' friends that there must have been a grave mistake in the report that he died from carditis, as he was known to enjoy perfect health. So far-reaching were these rumors that officials of Scotland Yard had the body of Mr. Wells exhumed and a complete autopsy performed. The result, made public for the first time today, was that Mr. Wells had died of poison.

After a thorough search it was found that a vial of strichnин had been purchased by Mrs. Wells at a neighboring apothecary shop. Mrs. Wells was to have been called for legal questioning when her sudden death occurred.





WEIRD STORY REPRINT

Bells of Oceana*

By ARTHUR J. BURKS

IT WAS on a heavily laden troopship, westward heading. Hours before, the sun had gone down toward China, trailing ebon night behind her. For a full week, since dropping the California coast behind us, there had been nothing in all the wild waste of waters for us to see except ourselves. No ship's funnels broke the lowering horizon, no sign of land, for our skipper had chosen a passage lying somewhere in between the usual steamer lanes. The nearest land, save that which stretched in eternal darkness some three miles below us, was more than a thousand miles beyond the southern horizon. We were just a single ship, burdened with a precious freight of souls, upon an ocean that seemed endless. The first day out had been squally, and everyone had been sick, save those of us who had gone down to the sea in ships before. But with the dawning of the second morning the sea had calmed down, and our vessel rode through the blue, toward the horizon bowl which ever crept before us, in the golden wake of the setting sun. The voyage, if the old salts spoke truly, would be uneventful; but with that

strange premonitory feeling which comes to all of us at times, I did not believe them.

Something, from the very first, warned me that our voyage was ill-fated. I couldn't explain my feeling. It wasn't a feeling of dread, exactly, nor of fear. Just a strange feeling of unease, much like that which comes to people on their voyage, when a ship is rolling slightly under their feet, and everything, until they get their sea-legs, seems strangely out of focus. That doesn't explain it, I know; but it is as near as I can put my feeling into words.

I knew, when the sun went down ahead of us, with the hundred and eightieth meridian less than twenty-four hours ahead, that we were on the eve of strange, momentous happenings. To add to my feeling of unease, and as though it had been all planned out by some invisible *something* or *somebody*, in the vague beginning, the officer who should have had the watch that night fell suddenly ill, and I was called upon to take his place. I knew, as I donned my belt, holster and pistol, that I but obeyed the will of some

invisible prompter—a prompter without a name.

We had seven sentries out at various important places about the ship, and I made the routine inspections before turning in, less than an hour before midnight. When I entered my stateroom and turned on the light, that feeling of unease was more pronounced than it had been at any time previously. I had the feeling, though I had locked my door when I had last quitted my stateroom, that I had entered again immediately *after* someone had left it. Yet that was impossible. I had carried the key in my pocket all the time, and my cabin-boy was not provided with one. There was no way that anyone, or anything, could have entered my stateroom in my absence, save—

Still as though my every move had been ordered by some invisible prompter, my eyes darted to the port-hole beside my bed. It was quite too small for the passage of a human body, and even to think of such a thing were the utmost folly. If anyone had gone out through the port-hole, that one had fallen, or plunged into the sea; for had the port-hole been ever so big, there was absolutely no way one could have left my stateroom by that way and still remained upon the ship—unless that one had gone out and were even now hanging by his hands along the ship's side. So strongly had the feeling of an alien presence obtruded itself upon me that, in spite of knowing myself an utter fool for entertaining any doubt whatsoever, I strode to the port-hole and looked out. There was nothing, of course, save water, now black and forbidding, stretching away to the south, to a horizon that, since night had fallen, seemed to have crept quite close to us to watch our passing.

Still unsatisfied, in spite of arguing with myself, condemning myself for a

fool, I deliberately closed the glass which masked the port, took my seat in a chair beside the bunk, facing the round glass—which resembled, to an imagination suddenly fevered, the eye of a huge one-eyed giant—of the port-hole, and began to undress. Mechanically I lifted first one foot and then the other, removing shoes and stockings.

But I kept my eyes upon the closed port-hole—and that feeling of an unseen presence in the room was stronger as the moments fled. My undressing completed, I stood erect to turn out the lights, and paused in the very act, a cry of terror smothered in my throat by a sheer act of will.

For the most fleeting of seconds, I had seen a dead-white face outside the glass which covered the port-hole! It was the face of a person who had drowned, I told myself wildly, and the dripping hair wore a coronet of fluttering seaweed. The eyes of this strange outsider stared straight into mine, devoid of expression, totally unwinking, and the lips, which seemed blue as though with icy cold long endured, smiled a thin and ironic smile. It took all the courage I possessed, which is little enough in the face of the unknown, to hurl myself across the bed, right hand extended toward the heavy screw which held the circular piece of glass in place. In the instant my hand would have touched the glass, the ship rode into the edge of the storm that was to fill the remainder of the night, and the stern of the steamer rose dizzily on the crest of a mighty wave, dragging all the vessel with it; and the face slid slowly out of sight below the port-hole, the bluish lips still smiling ironically.

I admit that I was trembling, that my fingers were unsteady as I fumbled with the screw to unloose the glass. When the port-hole was open once more, and the

cold breeze of this latitude came in to fan my fevered face, I thrust my head out of the port and gazed right and left, and up and down, along the curving side of the ship. But there was nothing, except straight ahead, on our port side. And even there, there was nothing but black water, huge mountainous waves, touched with whitecaps at their crests, like flying shrouds, or like lacy streamers created as a fringe for the mantle of night.

I watched several of the waves sweep under the vessel, which rose and fell sluggishly. The waves seemed to be traveling in no certain direction, but broke into a veritable welter of warring forces, roaring as they came together with the roaring of maddened, deep-throated bulls; valleys with darkness on their floors, mountain-tops touched with snow that shifted eerily in the breeze.

I WAS about to close the port when, many yards away from the ship, as though born of the womb of old ocean, I heard the bells!

Like the tiny bells which the bellwether wears to signal the ewes and the lambs, was the tinkling of the bells—like those bells, yet not like them, totally out of place in midocean, and I felt a strange prickling of the scalp as I listened. Hurriedly, driven by a fear I could not have explained then, nor can I now explain, I closed the port-hole again—and whirled about with another scream, which this time came forth from my quivering lips in spite of all I could do to prevent.

Just inside my stateroom door stood my sergeant of the guard, and his lips were trembling more wildly than my own, his eyes protruded, his face was chalk-white, and he was striving with all his power to speak. As I watched his manful struggle, I dreaded for him to speak—for I knew that what he had come to tell me

would be something strange and terrible, something hitherto entirely outside my experience.

"Sir," he managed at last, when I stiffly nodded permission for him to speak, "I just made the rounds of the sentries."

Here the poor fellow stopped, unable to go on, and his knees knocked together audibly.

"Yes, sergeant," I managed to mutter, "you went the usual rounds of the sentries, and then?"

"The sentry who should be on duty on the main deck, forward of the bridge, is missing."

Of course I knew on the instant that there might be many reasons for the failure of the sergeant of the guard to find the sentry—many logical reasons. The sentry might have quitted his post (a violation of regulations, true) for a quiet cigarette in the lee of a lifeboat; he might have been walking his post in the direction taken by the sergeant, so that the latter had not overtaken him, even with a complete circling of the main deck; he might—oh, there were many logical explanations; but I guessed intuitively that none of these reasons fitted the case. For one thing, the sergeant of the guard was an old-timer, had spent many years of his life at sea—yet he was frightened half out of his wits, and I knew he held as many decorations for bravery as any other officer or man in the marine corps. There was something terrible, something—if you will—uncanny behind this disappearance of the sentry.

I muttered an oath, more to prod my own flagging courage than for any other reason, and started toward the door, motioning the sergeant to precede me. But he shook his head stubbornly and barred my way. I halted, for it was evident that he had not completed his report.

"You'll maybe think me daft," he said;

"but I couldn't let you go out there, sir, without telling you everything. The corporal on watch at the head of the promenade gangway told me a strange story just before I made my rounds. He had opened the door leading onto the starboard promenade, for a look at the weather outside, and just as he was about to close it again, the ship lifted on the crest of a huge wave—and out beyond the wave, many yards away from the ship, he heard something which he likened to the tinkling of little bells!"

"Good God!" I exclaimed.

"And," the sergeant continued, "all the time I was looking for the missing sentry, I had the idea there was someone behind me, following me every step of the way; yet when I whirled to look, the deck behind me was empty."

"And you found no sign of the sentry?" I said stupidly.

The sergeant shook his head.

"Nothing," he said, "except—except—well, sir, you'll maybe think me daft, as I said before; but on the spot where the sentry had stood to wait for me on my last round, I found wet marks on the deck floor—the marks, as near as I could tell with my flashlight, of bare feet!"

Mechanically, as the sergeant spoke, I had done donning my clothes, leaving my shoes, however, unlaced. I felt an icy chill along my spine as the sergeant continued, and I dreaded, as I had never dreaded anything before, to ask him further about those wet footprints on the deck.

"The wet footprints," he went on, and he was talking wildly now, his words tripping over one another, so rapidly were they uttered, as though he wished to finish his report before I could interrupt again, "led away where the sentry should have been standing, straight to the starboard rail. Right at the rail I

stooped to examine the prints more closely. They were the footprints of a human being, I was sure, and the marks of the toes were blurred, and very wide, as though whoever—or *whatever*—had made them, had been carrying a burden in his arms!"

"Good God, sergeant!" I said again; "what are you driving at?"

"Just this, sir. There's something terribly wrong with this ship. *Something took that sentry bodily over the side!*"

I believe that putting a name, however meaningless, to what was in my own mind, caused a little of my courage to return, for I did not find it difficult now to leave the stateroom. The sergeant almost trod on my heels as I hurried to the main deck, starboard side, where the wind wrapped icy fingers around me, chilling me to the bone on the instant.

As I hurried forward I looked over the side, into the welter of waters—and stopped short.

Behind me the sergeant groaned—hollowly, like a man who has been mortally wounded. For out of the waters, away to starboard, came the sound of tinkling bells! I darted to the rail and leaned far outboard, striving to pierce the gloom. But there was nothing save the watery wastes, mountains and valleys—and two spots of greenish phosphorescence, far out, like serpent's eyes which watched the passing ship. But when I looked at them closely, straining my eyes, seeking the form below the eyes, the twin balls of eery flame vanished, a wall of water obtruding itself between.

WELL, we found the sentry, sprawled on his face, where the sergeant should have found him on his rounds. I turned the body over. It was dripping wet, entirely nude, and the lips and

cheeks as coldly blue as though the corpse had been dragged for hours on a line in the wake of the ship.

No matter how secluded one's life may have been, no matter how carefully one may have been guarded during one's lifetime, there come into the lives of most of us certain inexplicable happenings which may never be forgotten. This matter of the dead sentry was one of these for me, and I shall go to my grave with the memory of his cold cheeks and bluish lips limned upon the retina of my very soul. So many strange circumstances — thank God that, at the moment, I could not look into the two hours or more of terror which even then stretched before me, else I should most surely have gone entirely mad — were there connected with this matter that, taken altogether, it is little wonder that I have been unable to forget, or ever shall forget. The roaring of the wind which was lashing all the ocean into fury, a maelstrom in midocean, ghostly whitecaps stretching away into darkness, into seeming infinity; the frightened sergeant behind me, his teeth chattering with fear; the dead sentry at my feet, his body blue with cold, entirely nude as I have said; the marks on the deck of huge bare feet, wet as though the feet had come up out of the sea; the eery sound of bells between our vessel and the lowering horizon—and that dead-white face which I had seen beyond the port-hole of my own cabin a half-hour before.

What was the explanation of it all? What was the cause of the bells, if bells there were? What had come up out of the sea to stride barefooted across the promenade deck of the slumbering troopship? Had my sentry seen whatever had come for him before he had been taken?

Add to all these circumstances the fact that all hell was loose in the watery wastes, that it was now after midnight,

and you will understand a little of my feelings. Never before or since have I been so frightened as I was then. I don't regard myself as a coward, nor am I ordinarily superstitious; but show me the man who is without fear in the presence of the unknown, the utterly uncanny, and I will show you a man who has no soul.

I whirled, bumping into the sergeant, who manfully muffled a scream at my unexpected movement, and started, almost blindly, toward the stern of the troopship. As I strode along, with the sergeant at my heels once more, strange images fled across my mind. I remembered the tale of the Lorelei, the maiden who lured sailors to their death with her eery singing, and strained my eyes through the gloom, seeking shapes I feared to see. Then my mind went farther back, to the years before I could read, years in which, thirsty for knowledge, I studied pictures out of old histories to satisfy my longings for wisdom. One of these pictures came back to my mind as I hurried aft: a picture of a hideous monster of unbelievable proportions, who had come up from behind the ocean's horizon, blotting out the sunlight, long arms extended into the picture's foreground, the right hand holding aloft a mediaeval sailing-vessel which had been lifted bodily from the ocean. A fantastic picture, I knew now, drawn to prove the existence of terrible monsters beyond the horizon to which, as yet, no caravel or galleon had dared travel. I wondered, as I strode aft, why this old picture should return to my mind at this time, and fear was at my throat again as I walked.

"I am coming, oh, my beloved!"

The words, high-pitched with ecstasy, came from straight ahead of me, and out of the heavy shadow cast by a huge funnel stepped one of my sentries. Just for a second, as he strode toward the star-

board rail, I could see his face—and the face was transfigured, as though the man gazed into the very soul of the Perfect Sweetheart somewhere beyond the rail. Slowly, step by step, as though he would prolong the joy of anticipation, the sentry, who had hurled his rifle aside, approached the rail, still with his eyes fixed on the welter of waters overside, while I halted spellbound to watch what he would do. From out of the waters there came once more the tinkling of bells! And with the sound, as though the sound had been a signal, a huge shadow detached itself from the shadow whence the sentry had stepped but a moment ago, and loomed high above the luckless youth. At the same time the ship climbed high upon a monster wave, so that her starboard side went down, down, until white water came over the side—and when she straightened again, shuddering through all of her, the sentry had vanished. From well rearward of where the man had disappeared, from out of the smother of waters, there came a single long-drawn cry—and it was not a cry of terror, not a cry of pain, but a scream of ecstasy!

"He's gone, sergeant," I said stupidly, "but what took him? Not the wave: he had but to seize the rail to save himself."

"Did you see the shadow, lieutenant?" the sergeant replied.

I did not answer. He *knew* I had seen it.

We strode on again, heading toward the stern of the ship; and all about us now, over the ship, on either side of her—but never on her—there tinkled the eery, unexplainable bells!

WE STOOD at last in the very stern of the troopship, gazing into the ghostly wake far below our coign of vantage, and with certain care I followed the

wake rearward with my eyes. But one could not follow it far. That was the circumstance which impressed itself upon me almost at once. The wake died away, short off, within less than a dozen yards of the ship's stern—as though, at the very moment of birth, it had been ignominiously smothered.

In a trice I understood the reason, and thought I understood many things besides. For, like a monster raft, stretching away rearward as far as I could see, and into the darkness beyond my vision to right and left, there followed us, close to, an undulating mass of odorless seaweed. Acres and acres of it there were, rising and falling sluggishly, but keeping pace with the troopship through the night and the storm! Again there came that sound of bells, and my hair stiffened at the base of my skull when I saw, watching the seaweed, the result of the tinkling of the bells. The seaweed, when the bells sounded, seemed imbued suddenly with life that was utterly and completely rampant. Long tendrils of the stuff drew away to right and left below us, as though endowed with will of their own, and these tendrils, countless thousands of them, collided with other tendrils in the mass, and slithered over them so that all the mass of the seaweed writhed as though in torment, resembling countless hordes of serpents gathered together from all the evil places of the earth—and where the tendrils had drawn aside I could see black water in the rift as though the tendrils had drawn aside so that I *might* see. Some terrible fascination held me, my eyes fixed on that space of black water, for several moments after the tendrils of seaweed had drawn away to right and left—and up from the depths, into the opening, came two who filled all my being with abject terror—and something else.

One of the two was dead, I knew on the instant, for I could see his face, all white and drawn, yet with the blue lips smiling, of the ill-fated sentry who had gone over the side before my very eyes. And he had been brought up from the depths in the arms of—I hesitate to give the creature a name. A woman? I scarcely know; yet this I do know: in the instant I looked into her eyes, raised to mine for a full minute, I understood the ecstasy which I had read in the face of the sentry whom she now held in her arms. Her breasts, nude and unashamed, were the breasts of a buxom woman, her lips as red as full-blown roses, her hair as black as the wings of a crow, a mantle of loveliness all about her wondrous body, whipping this way and that in the storm.

Her eyes swerved away from mine, and one arm, shapely and snowy, raised aloft from the water—and to my ears came again the sound of tinkling bells. Once more the seaweed writhed and twisted, pressed forward about the ship; but a single mass of it detached itself from the larger mass, pressed close to the—should I call her "woman"?—and swerved away again; and the arms of the beautiful creature were empty. Instinctively I whirled about, knowing somehow that I must move my head before I met this creature's eyes again, and stared forward to the shadowy portion of the promenade whence the sentry had emerged before his plunge over the side. Up the starboard side of the ship crept a veritable wall of seaweed; up to the rail, pausing there for a moment, then to the deck, where it writhed for a moment or two, taking a weird distorted shape that made me think of a man, yet which I knew was not a man, before it strode into the center of the promenade. From out of the heart of this monstrosity there dropped soggly a white, cold figure. The second

sentry had returned, as the first had done!

Why? Why? Why? What did all this unbelievable terror mean?

I knew, as I searched through all my experience, seeking the key to this uncanny enigma, that we were heading westward outside the usually traveled sea-lanes; that ships seldom, if ever, came this way; that in seven days we had seen not one vessel, nor even the smoke of one upon the horizon. Why did not vessels come this way?

But I could not answer my many questions. I could only ask them, and hope within me that they be not answered, ever. Nauseated by the return of the dead sentry, nude as the first had been, I closed my eyes for a moment, and when I opened them again, there was no seaweed, no monstrous shape, upon the promenade; but even from where I stood I could see the wet footprints—and wondered whom next the creature of the deep would claim from aboard our ill-fated vessel.

RESOLUTELY I drew my pistol and turned once more toward the stern of the vessel. This creature of the depths, whatever it was, had taken life—twice. Whatever it was, it was mortal, and whatever is mortal a bullet will slay. But, in the very act of whirling, I stopped short—for between me and the stern of the vessel, smiling dreamily, water rippling over her nude and glorious body to splash upon the deck, stood the creature who had come from the depths in the wake of the ship, bearing the dead man in her arms. My arm fell to my side, my weapon clattered to the deck, and as I moved forward once more, slowly, a step at a time as the sentry had done, the wondrous creature held out her dripping arms, and my eyes drank in all the glorious wonder of her, from head to—but she had no feet!

Where the feet should have been, and the legs, there were neither legs nor feet, but a scaly column, wet and dripping, like a serpent with a woman's body. I screamed in terror and disbelief, but it was too late, and her arms were about me, preventing all escape. But, with the touch of those arms, I did not wish to struggle. I knew what had happened to the two sentries, knew the same was in prospect for me; yet at the moment there seemed nothing in all the world more worth-while than to slip over the side, into the depths, with the arms of this wondrous creature about me.

"Lieutenant! Lieutenant! For the love of God, what is happening to you?"

It was the voice of the sergeant of the guard, freighted with abysmal terror; but I did not care. The shapely, strangely warm arms of the sea-creature were about me, and the sound of the bells, unbelievably sweet now, was in my ears. For me the world had ceased to exist, save for knowledge that these two things were true. I was carried to the rail, and sent over slowly, without commotion, as comfortable as though I had been riding on a couch of eiderdown—and came to myself to know myself lost indeed.

I was deep down, whirling over and over behind the whirling screws of the ship, holding my breath until my lungs were nigh to bursting, swimming with all my might, striving to reach the surface, and life-giving air, when I hadn't the slightest idea which way was upward. With all my power I fought toward the surface, but my progress was slow and dragging, for there was a weight about my knees, as though arms were clasped about them, striving to hold me down. A wordless voice was in my ears, begging, beseeching, and there was something in the voice which made my struggles seem foolish and unnecessary, so that

I desired never to reach the air I needed. I closed my eyes, which I had opened instinctively upon striking the water, and two lips pressed firmly against my own—and those lips saved my life, and my reason; for they were the cold lips of a corpse, with neither love nor challenge in them. I flailed out once more, and my hand caught in the line which the steamer dragged over her stern to measure the knots she traveled. All about me as I was hurled forward, now under water, now with nostrils out for a brief breathing-space, the mass of seaweed rose and fell on the heavy seas.

GOD knows how I ever got back aboard the trooship; but I awoke at mess-call in the morning, and sent immediately for the sergeant of the guard.

"What happened after I came back aboard last night, sergeant?" I asked abruptly.

The sergeant of the guard stared at me as though he thought me insane.

"I don't understand you," he managed finally.

"Have we finally passed through the area of seaweed?"

"Seaweed? Is the lieutenant making sport of me? We're two thousand miles from any land, except the ocean bottom, and there ain't any seaweed anywhere! I don't understand you!"

"Let it pass," I said. "When did you last visit the sentries last night?"

"Just before midnight, sir."

"And were all of them at their post of duty?"

"Yes, sir."

"And what about the bells?"

Again the sergeant's puzzlement was so genuine that I knew he did not understand my meaning. How much of my experience had been real, how much fantasy? I tried another tack.

"Did you make a round of the sentries after midnight?"

The sergeant shook his head sheepishly—it is one of the rules of guard duty that one visit to all sentries must take place between midnight and morning.

"Then the guard hasn't been mustered this morning? Is everyone present? You don't know? Then go at once and find out."

Ten minutes later the sergeant returned, chalk-white of face, to report that two of the guard were missing, and could not be found anywhere aboard. He told me their names, and instantly my mind went back to the night of uncanny happenings just past, and the two nude bodies brought back from the deep in the arms of—whom? Or what?

I never knew, and to this day the questions I have propounded have never been answered.

But this I know: there are strange

things, and sounds, in the sea near the hundred and eightieth meridian, a thousand miles north of Honolulu—and this is the strangest incident in my night of terror: the clothing which I donned next morning was entirely dry; but my hair was stiff with salt water, and there was the tang of seaweed in my room when I awoke.

I looked, too, at the glass which covered the port-hole beside my bed: outside that glass were the smudged prints of thin lips, the blur above them which told of a face pressed against the glass from outside—as though somebody, or *something*, had tried to peer in, between nightfall and morning!

And the bells? I still can hear them, in memory, when sometimes I waken at sea after midnight, and the rolling and the plunging of the ship tell me that a storm is making.

In Mayan Splendor

By FRANK BELKNAP LONG, JR.

In dim dreams and shadowed memories
Of fabled cities I have dwelt apace;
And from strange springs and guardian trees
Have slaked my thirst, and scornful of the face
Of harsh reality have stooped to trace
Dark figures on the sands of alien keys:
In Mayan splendor I have spanned the seas
And clothed myself in legendary grace.

In Copan I have dwelt where serpent stones
And skies of dusky violet merge to form
A glimmering gate of wonder whereto bones
Of warrior dead are gathered in a storm
Of whirling clouds and crimson flames that roar
Beneath the sky-vault where great condors soar.

THE EYRIE

WELL, you've rung the bell once again with your February issue," writes C. H. Cameron, of Toronto, Canada, in a letter to the Eyrье. "It's very evident that you intend to make 1934 a banner year for WEIRD TALES, to judge by the care with which you have selected your stories recently. I have often wondered why your taste doesn't become jaded after these many years considering mss. of more or less one type. For myself, I've become so inured to horror tales that it takes an exceptional tale such as *Shambleau* to get a rise out of me. By the way, why not print a few stories with an ancient Egyptian setting? Houdini once wrote one for WT that was good, but you haven't published such a yarn in ages. Why not a torture tale of Tiberius—locale, his palace at Capri, where the most gracious death he would mete was the leap from a 2,000-foot precipice to the ocean below. According to history, many were glad to jump to get away from him. . . . The February WT contains several outstanding stories. *The Sapphire Goddess* by Nictzin Dyalhis had a novel twist to an old plot. Very good. I give it equal place with *Tarbis of the Lake* by E. Hoffmann Price. Price is hitting a good stride recently. Such stories are truly weird. Rud's tale of Maya had a certain ring to it that made it especially interesting. Realism is hard to attain and he seems to have a gift. Both Howard's and Smith's stories were good—they are always good reading and dependable. Keller's continued story is fine; I can hardly wait for its conclusion. I think it equal in interest to Jack Williamson's recent serial, *Golden Blood*. I see that the controversy over your covers still rages. Jack Darrow hits the nail on the head in his letter to the Eyrье. Don't forget your motto—'bizarre and unusual.' It should apply to covers as well as to stories."

Loretta Burrough writes from New York City: "As an old reader of WEIRD TALES—I started reading it nine years ago—I want to cast my vote against the undressed ladies on the covers. My taste runs to a sad-looking spook sitting on the edge of an empty grave, as more suitable for WT. Or something of the sort."

Robert Bloch, of Milwaukee, writes to the Eyrье: "WT is pretty good this month. At last the readers are in arms against the covers, which are rapidly getting worse. In my opinion, Hugh Rankin is once again your foremost illustrator, to judge from his work on Robert E. Howard's story this month. Howard, by the way, is wonderful in this issue; if he sticks to atavism, the ancient Britons and Solomon Kane, and drops Conan the Cimmerian Chipmunk, he will maintain his present supremacy in your pages. . . . How about giving us at least one good atrocious monstrosity on the cover, just to prove it can be done? And getting out 25-cent paper-covered reprint volumes in regulation format of the best stories from WT by Smith, Lovecraft, Quinn, Long, etc.? It would sell plenty, particularly if composed of the old, out-of-print tales." [For some time we have been toying with the notion of publishing such a volume. We expect to put out several such volumes in the future. As to monstrosities on the cover, we have used them before and will use them again.—THE EDITOR.]

Writes Konrad Leister, of Boston: "I have read WEIRD TALES rather regularly since 1928, but I am now determined to buy it every month, as long as the present excellence of the contents continues. It is the only periodical of that group dealing with outré and fantastic themes that I read: all

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Coming Next Month

SOMETHING moved in the blackness under the trees. Etched abruptly in the rising moon, Conan saw a darkly blocked-out head and shoulders, brutish in outline. And now from the shadows dark shapes came silently, swiftly, running low—twenty great spotted hyenas. Their slavering fangs flashed in the moonlight, their eyes ever blazed.

Twenty: then the spears of the pirates had taken toll of the pack, after all. Even as he thought this, Conan drew nock to ear, and at the twang of the string a flame-eyed shadow bounded high and fell writhing. The rest did not falter; on they came, and like a rain of death among them fell the arrows of the Cimmerian, driven with all the force and accuracy of steely thews backed by a hate hot as the slag-heaps of hell.

In his berserk fury he did not miss; the air was filled with feathered destruction. The havoc wrought among the onrushing pack was breath-taking. Less than half of them reached the foot of the pyramid. Others dropped upon the broad steps. Glaring down into the blazing eyes, Conan knew these creatures were not beasts; it was not merely in their unnatural size that he sensed a blasphemous difference. They exuded an aura tangible as the black mist rising from a corpse-littered swamp. By what godless alchemy these beings had been brought into existence, he could not guess; but he knew he faced diabolism blacker than the Well of Skelos.

Springing to his feet, he bent his bow powerfully and drove his last shaft point-blank at a great hairy shape that soared up at his throat. The arrow was a flying beam of moonlight that flashed onward with but a blur in its course, but the were-beast plunged convulsively in midair and crashed headlong, shot through and through. Then the rest were on him, in a nightmare rush of blazing eyes and dripping fangs. . . .

This weird story of a ghastly horror in the jungle, and a savage white woman who captained a pirate ship, will be printed complete in the May WEIRD TALES. Order your copy now.

QUEEN OF THE BLACK COAST

By ROBERT E. HOWARD

—ALSO—

SCARLET DREAM

By C. L. MOORE

An utterly strange and weird story about Northwest Smith—a startling tale of every adventures in another dimension of space.

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By A. W. BERNAL

A sensational story of the Masters of the Moon, and their terrific threat against the inhabitants of Earth—a stupendous weird-scientific tale.

BELLOWING BAMBOO

By ANTHONY RUD

The story of a weird revenge, and the unhuman bellow that came across the lake from an eery bamboo forest in the South American jungle.

THE SATANIC PIANO

By CARL JACOBI

A gripping tale of occult evil and a marvelous musical invention—by the author of "Revelations in Black."

May WEIRD TALES Out May 1

(Continued from page 520)

the others I have found cheap and tawdry, but WEIRD TALES maintains a literary excellence at times surprising. My favorite author is Robert E. Howard, whose powerful and virile tales of dim and legendary epochs have more than once quickened my pulse. . . . Like many of your readers, I should like to see a page devoted to your authors, especially Howard, Derleth (whose offerings are gems), and Smith. As to the cover illustrations, they are exquisite works, with beautiful coloring, and, though not always weird, most pleasing to the senses. . . . If it were in accordance with your policy to reprint serials, I should like to see *Drome*, which I did not read, but which I heard was very good; also, *The Monster-God of Mamurth*, by Hamilton, if this has not been already done. [We intend to reprint *The Monster-God of Mamurth* sometime soon, as that was a very popular short story, but not *Drome*, as that is a serial story, and you (the readers) have told us in no uncertain terms your opposition to reprint serials in WT.—THE EDITOR.]

A letter from Robert L. Bryant, of South Bend, Indiana, says in part: "Some ten years ago, my father, who happened to be a traveling salesman, brought home my first copy of WEIRD TALES. I've been addicted to reading it ever since. I made up my mind long ago never to bother you with my opinions, but after reading the February issue, I find my high resolve weakening. So here goes my three cents' worth. First, tell me why it is that some of your readers, who can face without turning a hair the gruesome monstrosities of H. P. Lovecraft, will blench at the sight of a naked but otherwise personable young woman on the cover. I think your covers are getting to be extremely good. Especially good was the one which illustrated *Black Colossus*. By all means, continue to print interplanetary stories. *Shambleau* was one of the best tales of the past year. It would have been a shame to bar it merely because the scene was laid on Mars instead of in Brooklyn or some other better known place. . . . How about another fantasy by A. Merritt? *Golden Blood* by Jack Williamson was a real treat, and *The Solitary Hunters* by Doctor Keller promises to be a pippin. I can hardly wait for the next installment. If Dyalhis doesn't write two or three sequels to *The Sapphire Goddess*, he's overlooking

a darned good bet and incurring the undying wrath of at least one reader."

"I can't refrain from a word of praise for *Shambleau*, by C. L. Moore," writes R. F. Searight, of Detroit. "You recognized an especially fine contribution to current weird literature when you accepted it. The utterly unique theme and the masterful handling throughout entitle it to unstinted praise."

From Maud, Oklahoma, comes a letter from Mrs. A. G. Edwards. "I read WEIRD TALES avidly whenever I get the chance," she writes. "Your Eyrie department seems to welcome reproach as well as praise, so I won't hesitate to express my viewpoint upon the subject. I like all of the stories with Jules de Grandin, and also the strong giant Conan; but stories ending like *The Weaver in the Vault* and *In the Triangle* give me such a feeling of revulsion that I get 'plumb' sick. But the reprint, *The Woman of the Wood* by A. Merritt, leaves me just a little sad, for it seems such a shame to have such a swell story end up that way. But I liked it. Truly I did. And the discussion about the cover. What's wrong with the nude pictures of lovely girls? I like them, and my only regret is that I don't get to buy WT often enough to have all the covers saved up. . . . I think that M. Brundage has a wonderful technique in painting girls without making them appear vulgar."

Malcom Bethune, of Berkeley, California, writes to the Eyrie: "This is the first letter I have ever written to a magazine reader's column. I have been a constant reader of your magazine for over five years and I should like to express myself in regard to several controversial issues and several which are not controversial. It is my opinion that WEIRD TALES is undoubtedly the finest of its type in existence. The majority of its authors are unsurpassed; therefore why are you so anxious to make your readers believe that, if alive, Edgar Allan Poe would undoubtedly contribute to your publication? He would undoubtedly contribute, but he would be surpassed by some of your authors. Your best writers, in my opinion, are Seabury Quinn, Clark Ashton Smith, E. Hoffmann Price, Robert E. Howard, H. P. Lovecraft, G. G. Pendarves, and Wallace West. Seabury Quinn is wonderful; whatever became of the idea to collect and publish his

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BACK COPIES

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Because of the many requests for back numbers of WEIRD TALES, the publishers do their best to keep a sufficient supply on hand to meet all demands. This magazine was established in early 1923 and there has been a steady drain on the supply of back copies ever since. At present, we have the following back numbers on hand for sale:

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These back numbers contain many fascinating stories. If you are interested in obtaining any of the back numbers on this list please hurry your order because we can not guarantee that the list will be as complete as it now is within the next 30 days. The price on all back copies is 25c per copy. Mail all orders to:

WEIRD TALES

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Chicago, Illinois

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stories in book form? I should certainly like to procure such a collection. Clark Ashton Smith's stories embody rare beauty and delicacy. Robert E. Howard is certainly one of the best; however, I have one criticism to make here. Why does he use the name Conan so often? There is nothing wrong with the name, but it is confusing; obviously his heroes are not the same person; almost any good Cimmerian name would do. I enjoy reading Howard's stories as much as those of any other author on your staff. E. Hoffmann Price deserves unlimited applause for the manner in which he handled *Lord of the Fourth Axis*. The lavish description of the ceremony and its results was superb. . . . But it is this lowly person's opinion that space should have been devoted to an explanation of what constituted the weirdness of *King Cobra* in the December issue and of *On Top* in the November issue. These stories would have gone over big in *The Saturday Evening Post*, but they should not have been included in your magazine. I should like to cast my vote against interplanetary stories. The little article by Alonzo Leonard is too painful and accurate an example of interplanetary stories to be even amusing. There are exceptions to this, such as *Shambleau* in the November issue; this story, while it might be called interplanetary, had none of the asinine qualities of most interplanetary stories. I am delighted to see Hugh Rankin's name under a story illustration again; his drawings convey the impression of fascinating mystery." [A book of stories by Seabury Quinn, about which you inquire, is under consideration. As to Conan: that barbarian adventurer is certainly the same person throughout all of Mr. Howard's stories dealing with him. The geography of the stories about Conan is Mr. Howard's own; the countries and the times are as definite (and indefinite) as the countries and times in Lord Dunsany's plays and stories. A discerning reader, however, may identify some of the places; Shumir, for instance, is undoubtedly the ancient country of Sumer in the valley of the Euphrates and Tigris rivers.—THE EDITOR.]

Writes R. Lerner, of New Haven, Connecticut: "Dear Eryie: *The Solitary Hunters* certainly is a fine story. I am so interested in it that I can hardly wait for the next issue.

All the stories in this January WEIRD TALES were fine; the best in a long time. I hope all the coming WEIRD TALES magazines are just as good."

Jack L. Grillo, of San Francisco, writes to the Eryie: "I would like to send you a whole carload of Winchell's orchids for your superb January issue. Thanks to you and your wonderful authors and artists. January brought my birthday and the fifth year of my allegiance to WEIRD TALES. I sincerely believe it (the January issue) to be the best you have published in the last five years. *The Vampire Master* by Hugh Davidson came to a smashing conclusion, and your new serial, *The Solitary Hunters*, by David H. Keller, bids fair to equal if not surpass it in vivid action and swift terror. The remaining stories were all excellent, particularly *The Red Knife of Hassan* and the reprint, *The Woman of the Wood*. Brundage is an artist of extraordinary merit. I believe that nudes can be used very effectively in the cover designs, but keep the pictures weird; also try to have the covers illustrate the feature story."

Writes David K. Collison, of Yakima, Washington: "I have been reading WEIRD TALES now for several years and it is by far my favorite magazine. I like Robert E. Howard better than any of the other authors, although they are all excellent. Conan I like particularly well, because he is the only hero I ever read about that was so tough he was not chivalrous to the, more or less, fair sex. He slaps them on the back when he's pleased with them and drops them into cesspools when he's sore at them. What a man!"

Writes Donald A. Wollheim, of New York City: "The Solitary Hunters by David H. Keller is the best serial you've had in a long time. Doctor Keller knows his stuff. He is perhaps the most true to life author in the field. *The Man Who Returned* was probably Edmond Hamilton's worst. Tell him to get busy and write us some more Interstellar Patrol stories. They were perhaps the best space-travel stories that were ever written. Get Robert E. Howard to write a few more about Kull of Valusia. That was his best character, and besides, those stories were his weirdest. But this Conan is the most cold-blooded cutthroat ever in print. . . . Glad to see Nictzin Dyalhis and Frank Owen

(Please turn to page 526).

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(Continued from page 524)

back, especially the latter. Owen is a master of the Chinese fantasy, I think the only one I have heard of. Keep the old magazine going and watch out for the vampires and werewolves. And if you should wake up some night and see two goblins standing by the bed, reject them."

Joseph Hatch, of Leavenworth, Kansas, writes to the Eyrie: "I have been reading WEIRD TALES now for close to a decade, and have read every story in every issue I could get my hands on during that time. I have yet to find a story in your pages that did not please me, though I am rarely pleased by any number of other magazines. The greatest thing you've done for some time is that of turning the cover illustrations over to M. Brundage. When I read a letter in the Eyrie that offensively criticizes Brundage's work, I feel like going out and looking up those prudes and challenging them to a duel with anything from boxing gloves to swords. It makes me so mad that any would-be reformer of the highest thing in art would try to compare WEIRD TALES to the 'red-hot, rare and racy' (also sexy) magazines that clutter our news stands of today, that I see red every time I read one of their letters. By all means keep Brundage's illustrations. . . . Now, to get along to your stories, I think *The Eighth Green Man*, by G.

G. Pendarves, that was published back in 1928, was the best short story you have published since I read my first copy of WEIRD TALES. *The Call of Cthulhu* by H. P. Lovecraft I place second, and *The Woman of the Wood* by A. Merritt third. . . . I was very glad to see another story by Nictzin Dyalhis in your pages. His *When the Green Star Waned*, that was published back in 1925, was also excellent. I have read several tales by Nictzin Dyalhis in other magazines, but his other stories are not up to the par he has set for WT. Now for the sheer, goose-pimply, hair-raising stories, I unhesitatingly choose *Whispers* by Robert S. Carr and *Dead Man's Belt* by Hugh B. Cave. About Seabury Quinn: I am always looking forward to his stories; the little Frenchman, de Grandin, with his triumphant exploits of the shadow world, is extremely great. I was disappointed when I saw no announcement of a forthcoming story about him in the next issue. But the disappointment was assuaged by the fact that Paul Ernst, Edmond Hamilton, Hugh B. Cave and Clark Ashton Smith will fill up the next month's issue. And there is a writer for you: Clark Ashton Smith. The way that fellow can paint imaginary scenes and make the reader see what he is talking about, is marvelous. Comes to my mind a story by him in WT some time ago, namely, *The Vaults of Yoh*

My favorite stories in the April WEIRD TALES are:

Story

Remarks

(1) _____

(2) _____

(3) _____

I do not like the following stories:

(1) _____

Why? _____

(2) _____

It will help us to know what kind of stories you want in Weird Tales if you will fill out this coupon and mail it to The Eyrie, Weird Tales, 840 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago, Ill.

Reader's name and address:

Vombis, an interplanetary yarn, and creepy; oh, oh! Well now, Mr. Wright, as this is my first letter, I hope you've read this far, and if you reprint *The Eighth Green Man* soon you'll hear from me again."

"I can't wait until *The Solitary Hunters* ends, to tell you what I think of it," writes Donald Allgeier, of Springfield, Missouri. "I've always liked Doctor Keller, and he is at his magnificent best in this story. I'm sorry that there are only three installments. Second place (and darn near a tie for first place) goes to *The Sapphire Goddess* by Nictzin Dyalhis, with Hamilton and Howard as runners up. I am also glad to see a story by Pope again. . . . A. Merritt's reprint in the January issue was excellent. I hope you can see your way clear to reprint *The Monster-God of Mamurth* by Hamilton. Remember, you have new readers as well as old to please, and many of them are unacquainted with the famous old stories of the magazine's youth."

R. H. Gayleard, of Washington, D. C., writes to the Eyrie: "I have been a regular reader of WEIRD TALES since the first issue, and can truthfully say I found something to enjoy in each and every issue. Lately there seems to be a bit of objection to some of the covers, in which I am interested as I have collected a number of them and would not like to see you print strictly conventional covers. However, if some of your readers object to nude covers, why not print plain covers and have an art insert of one or more illustrations? In that way everyone could be satisfied. Personally, I think WEIRD TALES could be improved by more illustrations, and I agree with Mr. J. D. Arden that the illustrations should suit every type of reader."

"I like your covers just as they are, and don't see how they could be improved on," writes Diamond Bencke, of Garden City, Kansas. "But I would buy WEIRD TALES even if you published it without a cover."

E. Irvine Haines, of Queens Village, Long Island, writes to the editor: "As an author and historian who digs into dry, uninteresting, musty records and letters, I read WEIRD TALES as a relaxation and for variety. I wonder why writers are persistent in trying to write about what is going to happen in the year 3000 or 10,000 instead of looking into the records of the past. The literature and records of New England, for example,



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are rich with material as to witches, familiars, and evil spirits, ghouls, etc., such as would make fine subject matter for stories in WEIRD TALES. The same is true of Canada as to the *loup-garou*, and the hectic days of the old French regime full of torture and horror. No one takes the trouble to write about the Spanish inquisition, or about Mexico under the Spanish and Montezuma. Too many interplanetary stories and tales of impossible conditions in centuries hence are appearing in WEIRD TALES. They occur with too much repetition and frequency. . . . *Tarbis of the Lake* by E. Hoffmann Price was the best story in the February issue, for it showed some research and considerable originality and was well written. The others were poor in comparison. . . . I would like to see some good ghost stories once in a while. There has been none of the hair-raising kind in many moons. As to the covers, I agree with many of your readers that it is all right to have undraped ladies on them, but for goodness' sake have them in connection with some story."

Readers, what is your favorite story in this issue? The most popular tale in the February issue, as shown by your votes and letters, was the second installment of Doctor Keller's thriller, *The Solitary Hunters*, which was closely pressed for first place by Nicztin Dyalhis' tale, *The Sapphire Goddess*, and E. Hoffmann Price's dreamy story, *Tarbis of the Lake*.

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